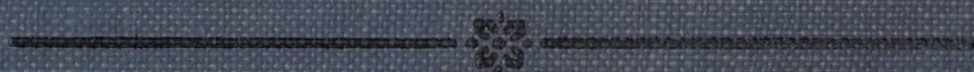


GREATER
THAN THE GREATEST



Hamilton Drummond



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GREATER THAN THE GREATEST

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BY

HAMILTON DRUMMOND

AUTHOR OF

"LITTLE MADAME CLAUDE," "WINDS OF GOD," "SIR GALAHAD
OF THE ARMY," "THE JUSTICE OF THE KING,"
"SHOES OF GOLD," ETC.



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En. C. B. Apr. 12/18

Of the many books read or consulted for the writing of "Greater than the Greatest" I desire to acknowledge my special debt to "Rome in the Middle Ages," Gregorovius; Mr. Douglas Sladen's "How to see the Vatican," and Mr. Lionel Allshorn's "Stupor Mundi."

Greater than the Greatest

CHAPTER I

A MEAN HOUSE IN MALAZZORBO

AT the mouth of the crooked village street, ill-paved and pitted with mud-holes, Rivara drew rein as he beckoned to a ragged urchin who peered from a doorway, the only sign of life visible in Malazzorbo.

"Do you know where the Signorina Pandone lives, little son?"

"Why, of course, signor." Though he left the shelter of the doorway "little son" kept out of arm's length, as if he had learned, even in his short life, that strangers must not be trusted too far.

"Then guide me to the Casa and I'll give you five sols!" He had meant to say two, but the rags, and the pinched face above the rags, stirred his good nature.

For a moment the boy stood scratching a naked ankle with a naked foot as if in doubt, then a look of peculiar cunning lit up his dark eyes.

"Five sols, signor? Is it a bargain?"

"As man to man," said Rivara gravely, "I swear it is a bargain. Go your shortest road, little son, for I am in haste."

"That's this way, signor," answered the boy briskly, and turned up the street.

Picking up his reins Rivara followed at a foot's pace, his posse of men behind him. Malazzorbo, he noticed,

had awakened. From doorways and windows to right and left faces looked out, unkindly faces for the most part, faces with fear and hate in their eyes. Rivara did not know it, but Malazzorbo had evil cause to remember the coming of armed men, and, in the narrow street his dozen of followers made as much noise on the cobbles as if they had been a troop.

But Rivara saw neither the fear nor the hate on the peering, furtive faces. Having noted the birth of life, as a man notes trifles when his life may depend upon them, he had straightway forgotten it in his acute distaste for Malazzorbo itself. A scholar and a man of cities, a lover alike of wide thought and wide spaces, he loathed these petty, cramped villages, all alike and all sordid, all decaying, all repellent. Life in them was not life but just bare leave to live—if indeed the leave were worth the having in such conditions! In his three weeks since quitting Rome he had seen scores of such human dust-heaps, each one with an increasing rise of the gorge. And of them all Malazzorbo seemed the most sordid, the most distasteful, the most repellent: not for the wealth of the Papacy and the Empire in one would he live in Malazzorbo.

It was at this point in his critical survey, that is to say some two-thirds of the length of Malazzorbo's one street, that the guide halted, pointing to a house on the southern or shaded side of the road where the sun never smote, and where the mildew spread in blotches on the walls.

"There, signor," he said, and slunk back out of reach of the clout he knew his trick so well deserved.

But no clout fell, and if one had fallen it would have been in recompense for what Rivara thought must be a fool's blunder. When His Eminence, the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte, whose secretary he was, had given him as a last instruction, "Come back by way of Malazzorbo, and bring my niece, the Signorina Bianca Pandone, with

you," Rivara had supposed that Malazzorbo was nothing more than the nearest landmark to the Casa Pandone, and the Casa itself just such a pile, strong of wall, bastioned, betowered, beturreted, fortress and castle in one, as the troubled nature of the times demanded for safety. And here, in its stead, was a sordid, mean house, flanked by sordid, mean houses in a sordid, mean village. Perplexed, he turned to the boy.

"The Signorina Pandone?"

"Yes, signor."

"The Signorina Bianca Pandone?"

"Yes, signor, that is right. She lives here with Tita and Giuseppi Sirani since her mother died; yes, and lived here before them, lived here always."

Rivara shrugged his shoulders. Perhaps there was a mistake, perhaps there was another Bianca Pandone. But if not it was no affair of his if the uncle lived at Rome in a palace and the niece at Malazzorbo in a hovel.

But as he made ready to dismount the boy said, very tentatively, "Five sols, signor."

"Five sols, for less than a hundred yards?" Then as no answer came, he drew out a five-sol piece, balanced it between a finger and thumb and held up the other hand ready to strike. "Come and take it!"

From the coin the lad glanced shrewdly at Rivara's face, then back to the coin and went boldly forward. At the worst five sols was worth much more than a cuffed ear.

"Take it," said Rivara, dropping the silver into the grimy palm. "Malazzorbo may be a rat-hole, but, thank God, the rats are not all cowards."

With a "*Grazzi*, signor," the boy pouched the coin in some fold of his rags and sprang for the door. "Tita!" he cried, pushing it open and thrusting his head and shoulders within, "Tita! Tita! Tita! Come quickly. Here's a great lord asking for the signorina!" Then ducking under

the horse's neck he withdrew his wealth to a safe distance.

As Rivara dismounted, beckoning to the nearest trooper to take his reins, the door, which the lad had drawn shut after him, was opened an inch or two, then slowly wider and a woman looked out. All Rivara caught was the glimmer of a scared face above a many-coloured scarf on the shoulders, then the door was pushed to again with force, and beyond it the hurried run of loose-shod feet could be heard. Tita, he supposed. In that case Tita was very frightened, was hard-featured, ill-favoured, and anything from thirty-five to forty years of age. Standing with the door pushed an inch or two open he paused, waiting. Tita would recover from her evident fright at nothing and come back. From the murmur of voices which had risen she could not be far away. But the minutes passed and Tita did not come back; growing impatient Rivara pushed the door wider and entered.

As he expected he stepped at once into a bedroom, the bedroom, no doubt, of Tita and Giuseppi: no doubt, too, every house in Malazzorbo had its room like it. It was large, lofty and dark, its one window, small and high up in the thick wall, close-fastened by latticed shutters. In the diagonal corner, three steps up from the earthen floor, was the huge bed where generations of Titas and Giuseppis had been born, had slept, and died. A broad oak chest, darker with age than even the darkness of the shadows, filled another corner: under the window stood an unbacked bench; the lofty walls, grey with age, were bare: Malazzorbo was content to ask no luxury from life but life itself.

Opposite Rivara was a door which Tita Sirani had pulled half-closed after her in her haste; that way came the murmur of voices, and Rivara pushed it fully open. He was still prepared to find he was on a wrong track. His original surmise was fresh in his mind; there might be two

Bianca Pandones in or about Malazzorbo, the one niece to His Eminence, the other first cousin to the gutter; therefore he pushed open the door. But uncles in the purple occasionally had nieces not far removed from the gutter, therefore he went circumspectly.

He found himself in a short passage or landing. To the right was a blank wall, to the left a narrow stone stairway lit by a small window at the turn, in front yet another door through which a voice, a rough, harsh voice, Tita Sirani's no doubt, came raised in expostulation.

"Signorina, of what use am I? He's a great lord and it is you he wants; that imp of a Tonio said so. Mother of Heaven! but I thought it was the bad times come again when I heard the tramp of the horses. Go to him, signorina."

"Go out to him and his troop? not if he was ten great lords! You may tell him so from me, Tita."

But Rivara gave Tita no time to reply. He knew his Italy north and south, and this second voice resolved his doubts. There was breeding in it, independence, self-assertion; three things not to be found in the voices of Malazzorbo or the Marches. For a third time he pushed open a door, paused just inside the threshold and bared his head. He was standing—as experience had told him he would be—in what, for want of a better name, must be called the kitchen of the house though, for the most part, the cooking was done in the open air. At times, too, the room was used by the villagers as an eating-room, though his second glance told him that was not the case here—the necessary furnishings were absent: his first glance had been at the two women who talked together. The one he guessed to be Tita Sirani and he gave her no heed, it was at the sight of the second that he bared his head.

She was tall and straight and strong, but all with restraint—not too tall to be womanly, not too stiffly upright

as to lose grace, while vigour of muscle and health were alike patent in the rounded arms, bare to midway above the elbows, and the oval face touched with colour by the air of the fields, but not coarsened by wind or sun. Her hands Rivara could not see: they were plunged wrist-deep in a tub of water where floated the few wisps of lace she possessed: being so few they were precious, being filmy, mended, remended and mended yet again, they could not be trusted to Tita's generous vigour. Hung by bands round her neck was a white, smock-like apron to protect a costume cut after a fashion no Roman lady of Rivara's acquaintance had ever seen.

Drying her hands in the apron, her eyes on Rivara, she rolled down her loose sleeves without the faintest trace of embarrassment. If her colour had deepened it was, to judge from the set of the firm mouth, rather in resentment at an intrusion than from any sense of awkwardness. The hands, he now saw, were sun-browned, but shapely and unroughened by toil—large, long-fingered, strong hands with strong, sinewy wrists.

Before he could begin his explanations, and while she was still rolling down her sleeves, she turned to Tita.

"Tonio said a great lord!"

Rivara went a step forward. "We have both made mistakes, Tonio and I," he said, "Tonio by announcing too much, I by expecting too little. Signorina——" He paused an instant, then went on, not doubtfully but like a man formally verifying an evident truth; "It is the Signorina Pandone?"

"Pandone is my name."

"Bianca Pandone?"

"Bianca Pandone," she repeated.

"Signorina, His Eminence, your uncle——"

"Have I an uncle a Cardinal?" she interrupted, her

face as grave as his own. "I had forgotten—as he has forgotten: in that our memories are alike."

"I am his secretary," went on Rivara, as nearly as possible as if there had been no interruption. His thought was that she became Malazzorbo as little as her wash-tub and quaint, village-fashioned garb become her uncle's niece. Opening a pouch attached to his girdle he took out a paper bound with thread and elaborately sealed at the folds. "He gave me this for you."

"Yes," she said, reading the superscription, "I am Bianca Pandone."

"And niece to His Eminence?" Rivara interposed hastily.

For the first time passion stirred on her face. "Oh, be sure there are not two Bianca Pandones in Malazzorbo." But the passion passed as quickly as it had risen. "With your permission, signor?" she said, pushing a thumb under the thread.

Rivara bowed, though she had ripped the seals asunder and opened the letter without waiting for an answer to her formal courtesy. No great Roman lady, could have been more at ease, or have played the part better. Very carefully, one hand resting on the edge of the tub in front of her, she read the six or eight lines, glanced up at Tita standing a yard away, then re-read them yet more slowly.

CHAPTER II

BIANCA PANDONE SPEAKS HER MIND

FREED from the restraint of her eyes Rivara appraised her curiously. Twice in fifteen minutes he had been deceived over her and the experience piqued him. As niece of His Eminence his expectations had anticipated just such another as any of the hundred girls of quality he knew in Rome, countrified and provincial perhaps, and lacking the polished veneer Rome alone could give: then had come the revelation of the village house in the village street and on the instant his imagination had jumped to the type of Tita Sirani, allowing for the difference of age.

Tita Sirani? Half unconsciously he compared—no, contrasted the two women: comparison suggests a likeness, an equality, here there was neither. Tita Sirani was short, squat-built, the muscles of her bowed shoulders and hips enormously developed by toil; to compel such a development she must many a day have tugged at the plough, yoked side by side with a four-footed fellow labourer. Her bare arms were rough and hard, their muscles knotted as a strong man's are knotted, the palms of her hands were leather for toughness, her face scarred by weather and burned to a coarse bronze, her eyes—an emotion part pity, part surprise, moved Rivara as he read her eyes. He had seen their look in the eyes of certain spaniels—faithful devotion, worship, love. It was with dog's eyes that Tita Sirani watched her mistress and dogs, Rivara knew, were good judges of character.

He took the girl to be about four and twenty—an age

at which most women in the Marches have found husbands. That she should still be Bianca Pandone was eloquent of her isolation. She was taller than Tita by a head, straight where Tita was bowed, slim, long-limbed, with a look of breeding—it was as if she felt his scrutiny and read his thoughts through her reading of the letter.

“My mother was a Caldora,” she said, looking him in the face a moment, then she dropped her eyes to the page again. No! there might be a contrast but there was no comparison.

Almost instantly she again lifted her head. “You know what is written here?” she demanded, rustling the paper.

“Yes, signorina. His Eminence told me——”

Without waiting for him to finish she turned to Tita Sirani. “He orders me to go to Rome.”

Tita’s leathern face flamed to a brick red under the bronze and her hands went out in a quick, impulsive gesture, only to be drawn back as impulsively before touching the girl. “Oh, blood of my heart!” she cried in a wail, but recovered herself as swiftly as she had withdrawn her hands—the shrinking and the recovery were one. “His Holiness will know best,” she ended heavily.

“Not His Holiness yet,” began the girl, but Rivara interrupted her.

“Perhaps, yes,” he said. “Honorius is ill—dying, he may be dead, I heard of his danger only this morning: St. Peter’s chair may be already vacant and who knows—the vote of the conclave——”

“Not His Holiness when he wrote this,” she interrupted in turn, rustling the paper again. Turning to Tita she laid a hand on her shoulder: Rivara could see the strong fingers moving on the coarse scarf as if in a caress. “Tell me, Tita, shall I go or stay?”

With a quick movement full of passionate fire Tita

caught the hand and pressed it to her lips in an abandon that ignored Rivara utterly: for the moment it was as if he did not exist, and Bianca Pandone and she were alone in the room—alone almost in the world itself. So fierce was the caress that, given a hate as robust and fiery as her love, it seemed to Rivara she could have bitten as readily as she kissed.

“Heart’s core! Can you ask me!”

“Whom else can I ask? I have only you and Giuseppi.”

“And if we were enough—if love were enough. But for you it is not, not just the love of Tita and Giuseppi! And what else is there in Malazzorbo? Malazzorbo! Pah! a dog-hole!” and she almost spat in her contempt.

Stooping, the girl kissed Tita on the forehead. “God be thanked for love,” she said. Then she turned to Rivara. “My uncle has been my uncle more than twenty years; why does he want me now, he who never wanted me before?”

“I know nothing but what he has written, signorina. Perhaps he has taken thought of Malazzorbo——”

With a little fluttering gesture of the hand she silenced him. “I have never known my uncle take thought for anything but—my uncle!” She fell silent, her eyes thoughtfully on Rivara’s face. It was a good face and the face of a man half as old again as herself, the face, too, of a man given to thought, of a man to be trusted in an age when there were few a woman dared trust blindly. “You know my uncle—I do not: signor, be frank and tell me—what do you advise?”

“Signorina,” he answered promptly, “you know Malazzorbo, I do not: you have your choice, Malazzorbo or Rome.” In his own mind it was as if he had said, choose which you will, Purgatory or Paradise, yet it is to his credit that he laid no emphasis on the alternatives. Perhaps, in the end, it was Tita Sirani who brought about a decision.

“My dove, there will always be Malazzorbo,” she said,

laying a gnarled hand on the girl's arm, "always Malazzorbo and love, remember that."

"Yes," said the girl slowly, "I know there will always be Malazzorbo."

Very carefully she read the letter a third time. The note of command in it roused her antagonism. Never once, that she could remember, had this brother of her long dead father given their poverty a thought. What right had he to bid her change her life? Necessarily she had heard of him from time to time; as Bishop of Castallo, Archbishop of Imola, Cardinal, his greatness was not to be hidden. No doubt he was so busy climbing to his place in the sun he had no time to look down upon those he had left below in the shade. Now, with the arrogant right of a hundred conferred favours, where there were no favours, not one, not even remembrance, he bade her come to Rome. But she had her choice, Rome or Malazzorbo; and Tita was right, there was always Malazzorbo; in her heart she added, there might not always be Rome.

"If His Eminence—perhaps he was not His Eminence then—had sent me this four years ago I might have thanked him." This, was the letter held in her left hand. "But instead, His Holiness sent——"

Tita caught at her with both hands. "No! no! Forget that and let it be forgotten."

"How can I forget? and how can it ever be forgotten?" answered the girl with sudden vehemence. "Besides, Signor——" She paused in enquiry.

"Rivara, signorina."

"Signor Rivara must be told that I remember: perhaps when he knows I have little gratitude to my uncle, and less cause to love the Church, he may say, Stay at Malazzorbo. Four years ago——" Again she broke off, but this time it seemed because she found it difficult to put in clear words what lay so clearly in her memory. The

delicate nostrils widened, the mouth grew thin-lipped almost to hardness and over the eyes a cloud gathered: Rivara, watching the change of face could not tell what it portended. For some reason she altered her form of approach.

"Here, signor—here in Malazzorbo, that is—we are in the Patrimony of Peter?"

Rivara nodded. "I know, signorina."

"It was natural, then, that Rome was reverend and the Holy Father both Holy and a Father. But four years ago——"

Again Tita broke in with a wail. "My dove, my dove, let it rest in its grave."

"No, it is not our shame, it is Rome's, and how can it rest in its grave? Five of us lived here in this house—my mother, who is dead; Joana, her little maid, who is dead; Tita and Giuseppi, and I."

There was certainly nothing dove-like about her now. A spark of fire lit the warm eyes, there was fire, too, in the rapid, impetuous thrust of the hand that brushed the brown-red hair back from her forehead. Yet even while the gust of passion drove her she paused.

"It is well you should understand that I do not love your Rome, and why. Rome, Mother of Nations! Mother of devils, I think. Judge for yourself. One day—this day of four years ago—I was on the floor above in the room that looks out into the street; my mother, bedridden by a palsy, lay in the room behind, the room over our head; Joana, the little maid, was busied with the housework here where we stand. Tita, by the Grace of God, laboured in the field with Giuseppi." Again she paused, less dove-like than ever, her brows drawn, her mouth stern, her finger-nails biting the palms in her compulsion of restraint. "Down the street—Spoleto way—came the tramp of feet as yours came today, and drawing the curtain I looked

out. Why not? They were our own? Had they been Pisans, Milanese, Florentines, I would have prayed God for His Mercy and fled to hide myself. But these were our own, soldiers of Rome, sons of the Holy Father, and there was no war. Remember that—there was no war. I even opened the window and leaned forward that I might see them better. Why not? They were our own, few sights come Malazzorbo way and I was less than twenty.”

Though Rivara was a scholar rather than a soldier he knew war, and understood now something of what was coming. With the knowledge his face grew hard—hard almost as her own but not quite; the man who guesses can never be stirred to his depths like the woman who knows. Besides, it is the woman who suffers. There was this difference, too; in his eyes was the shadow of fear, in hers the passionate hate born of knowledge.

“Down the street they swung in their march, four abreast, pikes on their shoulders, pennons a-flutter, armour a-glint, five hundred of them, a thousand perhaps, how could I guess—Malazzorbo had never seen the like. Leaning further out I clapped my hands at the brave sight: they were our own brothers who gave their lives for our lives, Soldiers of the Church, Sons of the Holy Father! Then, near the end, a dozen—less perhaps—broke off, but drawn by the splendid swing of the march I gave them no heed; leaning out of the window, watching, I heard no feet on the stairs, and it was only when the draught from the open door behind me stirred the curtain that I looked round.

“There were four of them, but I was not frightened. What was there to fear? There was no war and were they not our own? But one said something I did not hear, and the rest laughed and began to run across the room. Then Joana screamed and screamed and screamed again; Mother of God! such a scream! and I—I screamed too, nor ceased screaming and pulled the bench between us.

"They had flung the door shut behind them, now it was flung open and a fifth ran in. Somehow, at sight of him I ceased screaming for his sword was drawn and I was not afraid of that. But the sword was for them, these sons of the Holy Father and the Church, not me, for he drove them out with its flat and its point. I think he spoke to me, tried to calm me, though of that I am not sure. For through the open door, and the door open beyond the stair head, I saw my mother standing, clinging to the tester hangings, my mother, who for three years had never stood or even left her bed."

"Yes?" said Rivara. His hands, too, were clenched, their palms sweating, and even the little word came with difficulty. As for Tita, her finger-nails were tearing at the throat of her coarse bodice as if her panting bosom would burst the control.

"She died within the month, Joana within a week as I would have within a day. The Lord God called the one, a saint in charity, patience, pure thought and kindly deed; the other went to Him of her own will, and from my soul I believe He made her welcome and gave her His holy comfort, let the Church say what it may. No! In Malazzorbo we do not all love Rome, and the Holy Father is less our father than he was."

"He was not to blame," said Rivara, forcing control upon himself, "surely you see he was not to blame?"

"Perhaps not," answered she in the same dry, hard voice, "but he was quick enough to blame and curse the Emperor when his men sacked Forzocco, though the Emperor was not within three hundred miles of the town."

"Even so, signorina, he is dying—perhaps dead," said Rivara, "surely the dead may be forgiven?"

"Yes, but Rome lives for Rome is eternal," she retorted. "Will your new Pope care more for his people?"

"He may be His Eminence, your uncle."

"Then he will care less! But the present question is, do you advise me to go to Rome?"

For a moment Rivara made no reply. He had quite recovered his self possession. It was rather the girl's telling of her story, its concentrated yet repressed white-hot passion, that had moved him than the story itself. It was too common a tale for prolonged resentment; if such things moved a man's gall, then his gall would be always bitter. In Malazzorbo the tragedy was an event, an epoch, as the sacking of Forzocco was to Forzocco, but in Rome a tale too common to be twice repeated.

But should she go to Rome? One less experienced in the world's affairs might have laughed at the girl of Malazzorbo asking such a question and asking it seriously—as if it could matter whether she went or stayed! But Rivara did not laugh. He had his patron in his mind. The girl's hate was robust. How that might affect whatever scheme his patron had in his mind Rivara could not guess, but a robust hate is always a force to be reckoned with. That there was a scheme he was sure—Giordano Pandone was not the man to fetch a village girl out of Malazzorbo for nothing.

Then his speculative gaze travelled from the crown of red-brown hair, which in childhood might have justified her name, by way of the warm-brown eyes set under a broad brow, the nose with its delicately chiselled nostrils, the full-red-lipped mouth with its hint of other passions than that of hate, to the chin, firm and rounded, exquisitely ending the exquisite oval of her face, and all he found was good. Here was a force known and made use of all the world over. Suppose Rome, with its glamour and its greatness, its deathless history and red-blood heat of passionate life, transmuted this leaden hate to a golden devotion—no new miracle in the city's age-long history—would not the very robustness add force to force? The

woman who can hate best is the woman who can love best, to lose these forces from his patron's scheme might be a crime.

"Well?" she asked, meeting his speculation with a challenge.

"Rome, without a doubt," he answered, then added, "There will always be Malazzorbo."

"Will there be?" Turning, she laid her hand on the bowed shoulders. "Tita, would you forget me?"

"Oh, signorina, if love could forget, then it never was love."

For a moment the girl stood looking down into the eyes raised to hers, then her own filled. "No, thank God, love never forgets: there will always be Malazzorbo. Signor Rivara, I will go with you to Rome."

CHAPTER III

ROME!

“SIGNOR RIVARA, tell me something of my uncle’s household.”

It was the question Rivara had expected, half feared, yet at times had angled for ever since leaving Malazzorbo. Now that it was asked he avoided the pit-falls of the answer by taking refuge in a generality.

“The palace,” he began. But Bianca Pandone cut in upon his answer without ceremony.

“Oh, so there is a palace?”

In their three days from Malazzorbo Rivara had learned to respect her tongue, but at times the respect was as much for what she left unsaid as for any pungency of caustic criticism.

Now it seemed to him the simple question meant, a palace in Rome, yet he left us, his dead brother’s wife and daughter to what you saw in Malazzorbo! The criticism was as obvious as the censure was severe. But to say the obvious truth is not always wise: in the girl’s own interest he made up his mind to speak plainly.

“Signorina, for three days we have been good friends; you have won my admiration—I say it with great respect—by your courage and fortitude. Because I said there was great need for haste you have made great haste, and never once complained of the hardships and discomforts. You have made forced marches, faring miserably by the way; you have endured the heat of the sun—rain—the roughness of the roads——”

She put up a hand in warning. “You will spoil every-

thing—it will look as if I had need to be thanked, or worse still, praised for doing my duty. Even I can understand that with an election for Pope pending your place is in Rome. But we have been good friends—yes.”

“And I am going to risk that friendship by advising you.” A gleam of humour woke in his eyes an instant. “Almost as many friends are lost by giving good advice as by lending money, or doing a kindness! Signorina, in Rome you must say less than you think; in Rome it will be easy to make enemies. I do not excuse what happened so sorrowfully four years ago in Malazzorbo, no, not by one jot; but try to be tolerant, try to *feel* Rome, try to understand Rome—it is not possible, but try—try. She is not faultless, no human greatness ever was, and the greater the greatness the greater the fault and Rome is the greatest thing in the world. Signorina, I say again, I do not excuse Malazzorbo but, for your own sake, try to understand Rome.”

“I think I understand,” she answered quietly. “Not your Rome, but your advice—to learn to control my tongue. Signor Rivara, I have learned much in my three days, and it will take more than your advice to make us quarrel. And I have taken your advice already. In Malazzorbo I would have flown out at you, now I am as meek as a saint, so you can tell me of my uncle’s household without fear. Not the palace, you understand, but the household. It is only the soul that gives the body a value, and so the dwellers in the house are what count, not the house itself. Tell me of my uncle—no—that is not a fair question to ask his secretary; after my uncle who comes next in the household?”

“I suppose that would be the signorina, your cousin.”

“The——?” Bianca Pandone straightened herself in her riding-chair and turned to stare at Rivara. “I do not understand you, Signor Rivara.”

On his part Rivara looked her calmly in the face. She

saw there was an unusual flush on his cheeks, a challenge in his eyes, and when he answered her astonished question the changed note in his voice put her on her guard—here already there was need to follow his advice and say less than she thought.

“Yes, the Signorina Emilia—niece to His Eminence.”

“Emilia Pandone?”

“Certainly.”

The challenge was still there, clear and unmistakable, but with its warning Bianca thought she read something of appeal. And because of the advice, but also partly because of the appeal—had they not been good friends for three days?—she did not flame out that she had no cousins Pandone, nor could have, seeing that His Eminence was her father’s only brother. Instead, she said quietly, “Tell me about her, Signor Rivara,” and was rewarded by the disappearance of the challenge, cast out by a sudden light that leaped to Rivara’s eyes, relief perhaps, perhaps something deeper.

“Thank you, signorina,” he said earnestly, “you will never regret it.” But what he thanked her for, or what she would never regret, he did not make clear. If he had put it in a word he would have said, Toleration. “The Signorina Emilia is——”

“The Signorina Emilia!” she repeated solemnly as he paused, evidently perplexed to find the right word. “Do you know, I already like your Rome better than I did? How old is——” There was the briefest of pauses, then she added, “my cousin?” And again Rivara’s eyes were grateful.

“About twenty, I think.”

“Beautiful?”

“People say so,” he answered, looking straight before him.

The girl laughed. “Then I must not ask if she is like me.”

"A different type, signorina." His tone was grave as before, the flush still on his face, but the corners of the mouth were caught in a half humorous twist. Also he was very grateful; the pit-falls had been seen and avoided.

"You are not very communicative! I have to drag every word out of you. Who comes next?"

"Alessandro, her brother."

"Another cousin?"

"Yes, signorina, though on his own valuation he comes first of all."

Again she laughed. "You have sketched him in a sentence all but one thing—how old is Alessandro?"

"Seventeen—eighteen," answered Rivara indifferently.

"And who comes next?"

"Myself, I suppose."

"Then Alessandro is even a greater fool than I thought him! And next?"

"The chaplain, the *majordomo*, the——"

"Thank you, these can wait," she interrupted, and sat silent a minute or two.

She was plainly lost in thought, her mind leagues away from the miry roads of the *campagna*, washed into water-holes by the winter rain, and rutted deeply where the huge wooden wheels of carts from the Sabine hills had cut into the soft track. With almost every stride her horse lurched or floundered, but she gave no heed, her strong, supple body yielding to the swing, or counteracting the changed level as by an instinct. When she roused herself and spoke her voice was as grave as Rivara's had been, nor was there now any suggestion of laughter in her eyes.

"I am not a child, Signor Rivara, and I see no value in playing at pretences. Emilia and Alessandro are, of course, my uncle's children?"

"Yes, signorina."

"And their mother?"

"Dead many years ago."

"But what does Rome say?"

"Nothing, signorina. Rome understands, and if anything Rome admires His Eminence for his frank honesty."

"And I think Rome is right," she answered. "By the thickening of the villas we should be near our journey's end: is there anything you wish to say to me before we arrive—we have been good friends these three days."

There was no mistaking the inferential appeal, almost inferential claim, in the last words, and it was Rivara's turn to ride thinking in silence. Of late they had been riding through the farms and vineyards which supplied the city with the milk, vegetables and fruit so absolutely necessary for its life. These were beginning to give place to what she had called the villas, small summer residences with wide *loggie*, each in its garden and well shaded by cypresses, which the wealthier Romans, detained in the city during the hot months, had taken to building beyond the walls, encouraged by the comparatively long endurance of peace.

It was not just that the use of his own words moved Rivara. It was true it did, but since he had spoken them she had met him in a difficult passage with an intuition and breadth of mind that had touched him still more deeply. What would have happened if she, bred in a narrow village rut, had refused what Rome accepted—if pride or anger at her uncle's neglect had said, I am the only Pandone! No doubt, compared with Rome she was a cypher and helpless, but there would have been much pain for those—Rivara said those in his mind, but in reality there was only one of whom he thought: Alessandro might fend for himself!—much pain for those whom he wished to spare pain. For that he was grateful. And Rome was near, and in Rome was—the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte with his scheme! When he reached that point in his thoughts Rivara looked up.

"Nothing, signorina; at least, nothing but this—there is always Malazzorbo."

"Always Malazzorbo," she repeated, like one who understood more than the mere words. "And you would help?"

"Have no doubt of that."

"Thank you; then I am not afraid," she answered, and rode on in silence. To Rivara the assurance was unnecessary, he had never supposed that any time she had felt fear; uncertainty, doubtfulness perhaps, but nothing more.

Presently Rivara, to whom the road was as familiar as Malazzorbo street was to her, drew rein and beckoned to his second in command, a grizzled man-at-arms in half armour, as were all the troop.

"Wait here for us, Jacopo. And you, signorina, follow me; I have something to show you which no one sees twice in a life-time."

Turning to the right he led the way along a bridle-path which presently began to ascend steeply through a grove of oak and chestnut, showing no more than the first rising of the sap in the buds swelling on their boughs. That they travelled now north, now west, following the twistings of the track, Bianca knew by the level sun gilding the fretwork of the naked boughs into innumerable fantastic shapes, but at last, as the path grew level, Rivara turned definitely to the left. Suddenly the grove ended, and as her horse cleared the maze of tree trunks Rivara reined up sharply, stretching out an arm.

"Rome!" Something of pride, something of worship, something of reverential awe, were crowded into the single word. It was as if one said: "The glory and the greatness of the world!" Before them, not just at their feet, yet not so far removed that the first surprise drifted through distance into bewilderment or confusion, lay such a com-

mingling of widespread palace and tower, spire and turret dome and colonnade as beggared imagination. A thin haze, born of the near approach of night, levelled the seven-fold throne of the Mother of Nations, softening but not concealing the contours as with some veil of dim antiquity, while far upon the right a sparkle cut the grey line of the distance underneath the sun. It was the sea, and at her first sight of that rim of the world Bianca Pandone's heart stirred as it had not stirred at the two thousand years of story gathered beyond the slope.

Rivara caught the sunset glow on her face and mistook its source.

"Rome!" he repeated, reining back his horse till they stood side by side. A glow was on his face also, but it was not altogether the glow of the sun. "Rome that was, Rome that is, but who can say the Rome that yet shall be? Rome, Christ's Seat upon earth, the heart and pulse of that which is the Life of the World; Rome, the Greatest among the Great!"

"There," and he pointed downward and forward, "with the dome-topped bell tower rising beyond it on the left is Saint Peter's, the throne of Christendom, the Church's Holy of Holies, the Sarcophagus of historied centuries, grey with its nine hundred years of stress, a Rock of Time glorious with the promise of Eternity. That pin-point, barely visible beyond, is the obelisk Caligula brought from Heliopolis; in the bronze at the apex rest the ashes of the greatest of the Cæsars, at its forefront died the greatest of the Apostles, crucified as was his Lord, but head downward—the glory and the infamy of Rome!"

"That grey-brown pile between us and the campanile is the Vatican, a palace built and still in the building; to the left the huge cylinder of marble on the river's bank is the Castel Sant' Angelo, where eight Emperors of Rome were laid to their last rest a thousand years ago; it is now

a fortress and he who holds Sant' Angelo holds Rome. Beyond is the flattened dome of the Pantheon, its foundations rooted in the ages before ever Christ came upon earth; yet further, hardly less ancient, are the broken masses of Minerva's Temple. That thin shaft is Trajan's Column; there he still stands and has stood through a thousand years, looking out upon a Rome not even his imagination ever pictured.

"To the left is the Esquiline; there, with its bell tower, stands the Church of Maria Mater Dei. To its right, on the Capitoline, near the very crest, is the Aracoeli, the church of the Altar of Heaven, built by Gregory the Great on the site where Juno's Temple stood; truly, Julian was right when his despair cried out: Thou hast conquered, oh Galilean! Beyond, hidden, is the Forum where lie buried the very bones of the ages, but that further grey rim where a tangle of life grows through the ruin of death, is Nero's Colosseum.

"Just beyond, and to the left, is Santo Clemente, still further Santo Giovanni of the Lateran, the Mother and Head of churches the world over; there, through centuries, the Popes have dwelt, but now more and more at the Vatican. To the left, scarcely visible in the mist, is the slender tower of San Tomasso, with its giant lance-shaft imposed upon its cross. It is one of Rome's Vigil Churches. Nearer, within the city, that dome to the right is the round church of Santo Stefano; again to the right, on the brow of the Aventine, stands Santa Sabina, where of old stood the temple of Juno, Queen of Heaven; beside it is Sant' Alessio. And there, far to the south where you catch the glint of the river as it curves to the east, stands Santo Paolo, the Church's sentinel and guard beyond the walls."

He fell silent, his hand sinking upon his thigh, and so sat gazing over the far-flung undulations already darkening in the first of the crepuscular greyness. His lips moved

soundlessly and in his eyes glowed the fires of worship. All his life he had lived in Rome, as a boy he had fed his imagination upon her history and her legends, the one as real to him almost as the other; as a man he had grown to love her as of old the Jews had loved their holy city, her very stones held sacred with a jealous reverence.

Of late, as Bianca had guessed with her woman's intuition, a second passion had crept into life, not incompatible with the first. Now she would have liked to have asked him something of the spirit which gave these dead bones life, something, too, of what lay under that far western horizon where the sun's rim dipped through a golden, roseate glory to eclipse, but the rapt worship in his eyes silenced her. Presently he spoke again, but not to his companion.

"Rome! Rome of the twenty centuries, Rome of the glorious tradition, Rome of the ancient Kings, Rome of the Cæsars, Rome of the Mother Church; the mistress and the mystery of the ages—the half was not told of her! When she speaks the world listens; her very silences——"

But suddenly, sharply, the silence of the great city was broken. Borne on the south-east wind that beat in their faces, blowing up from the Pontine marshes, pealed the great bell of the Capitol, tolling in single clearly defined, solemn strokes—eleven times the brazen funereal beats cut the air, then the tolling ceased as abruptly as it had rung out, and by reason of the ceasing the silence seemed heavier, more brooding than before. But again, almost instantly, the dumbness was broken with the same startling suddenness. From the five great Patriarchal Churches, Saint Peter, Saint John of the Lateran, Saint Lawrence beyond the walls, Saint Paul, and Saint Mary the Great, rang as with a single impulse and a single echo, the eleven sonorous, solemn beats. Removing his cap Rivara sat bare-headed.

"The Pope is dead!" he said, looking across to Bianca. "Honorius is dead, eleven years he has reigned and he is dead—listen to the bells!"

For now, led by the great deep-throated bell of the Capitol, every church and convent bell in Rome—how many who can say?—scores, and scores, and yet scores again—was pealing out its message of death and warning—Honorius the Pope reigned eleven years and Honorius is dead—Honorius is dead—is dead—is dead. At his consecration a wisp of tow had been burned before him that he might remember how swiftly passes the greatness of the world; it flames, it glows, it passes in smoke, and for him it had passed—Honorius was dead. So said the bells in their eleven strokes. But soon the unison was lost as bell after bell broke time, until at last the linked pealings rolled across the city in one continuous muffled reverberation—Honorius is dead.

"The Church's Head is taken from her," said Rivara. "God send her a man of His own choosing in his place."

"My uncle, for example?" But Rivara left the question unanswered. Replacing his bonnet he gathered up the reins.

"Come, signorina, our place is in Rome and with as little delay as possible."

Nor was there any time wasted on the road. At a pace that bordered on the dangerous, so rapid was it, Rivara led the way down hill to his waiting troop, but made no pause until, having skirted the huge wall built by the fourth Leo, to enclose the city called by his name, he drew rein at the gate.

"Who is in command?" he demanded sharply of the guard.

"Captain Zarilli, signor."

"Then say to him that—but there he is himself. Oh! Zarilli! Zarilli! It is I—Rivara," he called out, and was silent until the other joined him, laying a hand famil-

iarly on Rivara's knee but giving more attention to Bianca Pandone, who had halted a little in the rear, uncertain and indistinct in the dusk.

"His Holiness is dead?"

"The bells say so; he took a week to make up his mind," answered the other carelessly. "I'll wager he wished he could answer *adsum* when Otho tapped him on the head with the hammer! Rivara, stoop down; who is——?" and he jerked his head towards the shadow in the rear.

But Rivara did not stoop down. "What is the news—who will succeed him?"

The soldier shrugged his shoulders. "I neither know nor care so long as it is not another sheep like Honorius, a goat like Montelengo—" he paused, laughing, "or a fox like Pandone!—though of the three give me the fox."

Again Rivara let the suggestion pass.

"Then you know nothing?"

"Nothing at all, and, as I tell you, I care less. If they should make the Emperor Pope, now, I would throw up my hat! Rome would be trul Rome and not a rabbit warren of priests!"

With a nod Rivara roused his tired horse and rode on, Bianca Pandone following. On the left she was aware of a glimpse of the domed bell-tower Rivara had told her was the Campanile of St. Peter's silhouetted against the purple sky with, behind it, mass upon mass of grey bulk, and beyond it a yet more towering bulk. There, she supposed, lay the dead Pope. But it was no more than a glimpse as they swung round by the right to a second gate, less closely guarded, which gave access from the Leonine city to Rome proper, and so passed out into a bewilderment of narrow streets bordered by high-pitched gloomy buildings and divided by yet narrower lanes, ill-paved, miry, and plagued with evil smells.

The one thing sure to the girl's confused mind was that

they traversed a bridge, plunging anew from the sweetness of the fresher, more open air of the river into a labyrinth where again the atmosphere grew close and heavy. Here and there a new-lit lamp hung like a remote star, but for the most part the greyness of the thickening dusk was unrelieved—a dusk that had grown suddenly almost to the darkness of night, so dense were the shadows. In the thronged streets progress was slow. At every corner knots of men and women were gathered, talking excitedly, while constant jostling streams, soldiers afoot and on horseback, ecclesiastics, nobles with their armed guards, honest citizens, prowlers of the night, the shifting, restless microcosm of Rome, poured along the main thoroughfares. Emotion there was in plenty, but of the emotion of sorrow Bianca saw little or none: though over all the bells rumbled their “Honorius is dead.”

Presently, having turned from a laneway into a broader street, Rivara came to a halt opposite a gated archway already fast closed, and as he called aloud to the guard within the girl knew her journey was at an end. With instinctive curiosity she looked up, but in the short interval before the opening of the gate she caught little through the darkness except an impression of frowning strength—a massive, smooth-faced wall, blind in the lower courses save for narrow loopholes, windows above, but windows barred and cross-barred like a prison, and over all a pent roof hanging against the purple of the sky like a cloud. Then Rivara rode through the archway, her horse at his girth, the troop followed, and the gate clanged behind them.

CHAPTER IV

ALESSANDRO PANDONE PLAYS A JEST

BIANCA PANDONE was still standing in the courtyard, easing her cramped limbs after the long day's ride, when she became aware of a zephyr whirlwind at the door open behind her—a whirlwind for its tempestuous rush, but a zephyr in its gentleness. The light streaming from the lamp within was obscured, then it flashed out again and a voice that had much of the zephyr in it and yet something of the impatience of the tempest called out:

“Signor Rivara, Signor Rivara, have you brought my cousin? Ah, is that you, Cousin Bianca?” Again there was the rush of the whirlwind and Bianca, as she turned, was caught in a clasp that had a suggestion almost of fierceness in its passionate warmth. “You will let me love you a great deal? You must, you are so big and I am so little.”

“You are Emilia?” said Bianca and, half involuntarily her arms went round the small figure that pressed so eagerly against her. A child's figure it seemed, it looked so small and felt so slim, and soft and yielding under the pressure of her arms; but it was a woman's face that looked up in the lamplight, the sweetest and most lovely woman's face she had ever seen—in Malazzorbo there was little beauty beyond the beauty of childhood; the conditions of life, to labour at all seasons with the beasts of the field, did not favour its preservation.

“Yes, I am Emilia, and I have been so happy since our uncle, a week ago, told me you were coming. Do you know, I never knew until then that I had a cousin?”

"Yes, you have a cousin," answered Bianca in a tone that had a special significance for Rivara. He was standing apart, a shadow among the many busy shadows which came and went in the unsaddling of the horses. The use of the significance reminded her of him and she tried to pay a debt. "Signor Rivara has been so kind and—he told me of you."

A light flickered into the girl's dark eyes and the same instant Bianca felt the clasp across her shoulders tighten in a spasm. Then one arm slipped down to the waist, lying there in a light hold, while the other hand was held out to Rivara.

"Signor Rivaro is always kind."

Stooping—he had to stoop low—Rivara touched her hand with his lips. "Kindness comes easy," he said, straightening himself. "Signorina, is it true the Pope is dead?"

With a jerk the hand he held was drawn away, "*Dio mio!* Yes! and not for the first time. Cousin Bianca, you are laughing at me? I mean that other Popes have died without the world standing still. And does one talk of dead Popes when one has not seen one's friends for three weeks? I think the living come first! Oh yes, I know; you mean my uncle may be elected? But there is no chance of that: Annetta in the Flower Market told me so this morning; Cardinal Castiglione's secretary told her, and he knows. All the cardinals' secretaries know it except——" she paused an instant and a subtle change slipped into her voice as she ended, "except those who have not been in Rome for three weeks! Come, Cousin Bianca."

But as they turned to open the door there was a rush of feet on the street without, a confusion of sudden cries mingled with little bursts of laughter and a curse or two. Then came a hammering on the gate, iron on iron, as if scabbards or dagger hilts were beaten impatiently against

the bars, and a voice called out, "It is I—Alessandro—open, you fools, open, open," and in rushed half a dozen lads, breathless with haste and merriment. Promptly the same voice cried: "Shoot the bolt, Savelli, and let them curse their fill. If curses broke down gates in Rome there'd not be many left on their hinges. By the head of Janus, but that was a jest! I've got a colic with laughing—or may be with running—and nothing but a drink will cure it. Are we all here? Let's count noses and see—one, two, three, four, five, six. That's all right, so come with me, my sons, and let the dogs howl."

And if by dogs he meant the mob straining furiously against the bars of the gate, howl they did. Faces, white-hot with passion, were pressed against the barrier, ragged arms, ending in twitching, hungry, groping fingers were thrust through, clutching at emptiness, and every foulness that the foul mind of ignorance bred in a gutter could devise was shouted. Not the worst was bastard and an ugly play upon the name, Pandone.

"It is 'Sandro," whispered the child-woman in white, but though Bianca had drawn her nearer to herself in the instinct of protection there was no suggestion of fear in the responsive closer shrinking.

But he who had been called Savelli was less philosophical. Perhaps the stone which had caught him on the shoulder-point as he ran—he being last—had soured his temper: Roman cobbles cut deeper than curses.

"You hear them? Will you let them howl such things at you and do nothing? There are six of us, you have a score, perhaps thirty men of your own here——"

"Yes, I hear them! They're like nightingales and sing in the dark! But who heeds their likes?" Elbowing space through the little group he pushed his way to the front, two feet off from the bristle of impotent, clutching fists. "Heed them? Why, if to-morrow—yes, or now,

I scatter a handful of coppers they will shout any tune I please—until my pocket is empty!”

The sarcasm had just enough truth in it to goad fury to frenzy. Like a dying fire swept by a gust of wind to the roaring flames of new life their rage broke out afresh. A rush from behind drove those in front against the gate until the bolts rattled in their sockets; the very bars seemed to bulge under the strain. But Alessandro Pandone knew the strength of the defences. It would take more than curses and bare hands to break down welded iron, and, compressed as the assailants were by their own weight, there was no freedom for even their wrath to fling a missile through. So he straddled his legs, set his fist on his hips and looked the mob calmly in the face.

“Open the door and go out to them?” he said. “No, no, Savelli. Never spend good blood where a purse later on will buy the same end. And they would rather have payment that way—they’re Romans!” Suddenly he wheeled round, catching a comrade under the arm. “Come along, all of you, I had almost forgotten my colic; where’s that wine?”

But Rivara had pushed his way to the front and the two met.

“Signor Alessandro, is this seemly, with His Holiness lying dead at the Vatican?”

“You are wrong,” the lad answered, jeering, “it is at the Lateran. Either tell a story right or do not tell it at all.”

“Lateran, or Vatican matters nothing. Every bell in Rome tells you His Holiness lies dead——”

“Faith! I hear them!” Round he turned to his fellows. “My sons, here is a riddle for you—what makes more noise dead than alive? You can’t guess? Why, a Pope—when he is called Honorius! Which of you can cap that?”

"Signor Alessandro," in face and voice Rivara was alike stern, "have respect for your uncle's office."

Back swung the lad, and though he spoke mockingly there was offence as well as mockery in his tone, while in his eyes lurked a threat more meaning than the words themselves.

"Signor Rivara, have respect for my uncle's nephew, or by every dead Pope in Rome, you will repent it! And what is all the bother about? A nothing, a nothing at all. Be quiet, you rabble behind, while your master is speaking! We were at Merola's, the wine-seller down by the river, and because these bells jangled out he must needs close his shop and sell no more. That drove us out into the street, and there by the Vico del Falcone, on the bank, we happened on a pretty girl. One of us, who was it? You Rinaldi? wanted to kiss her; I give you my word a kiss, nothing more! But the little fool, a little citizen wench, if you please! screamed when Rinaldi laid hands on her, and first one fellow came clamouring at us, then another, so to teach them manners we flung them into the river."

"Drowned them!" cried Rivara aghast. This was worse than he had feared.

"Oh, they'll fetch up somewhere by the Ponte Rotto, I dare say, though the current is strong, and I would not ask to go river swimming myself. But the girl shrieked louder than ever—be quiet, rabble—and in the end we had to run for it. What is the use of looking sour, Rivara? It was not our fault. Merola should not have closed his shop—come to think of it, that means Honorius should not have died and I'm sure he agrees with me, so it certainly was not our fault." Turning on his heel he faced the gate. "My gutter-dwelling friends, do you hear the tolling? The good Pope Honorius is dead! Think shame to yourselves, brawling there in the public streets with such sorrow abroad. Disperse—vanish—evaporate—if the guard lays

hands on you you'll suffer for it; that would grieve me and you—especially you! Come, sons, I think my thirst dates from the year One of the Republic!”

Until they had all entered the house by the lamp-lit door where, ten minutes before, Bianca and Emilia Pandone had preceded them, Rivara kept his place, then he went forward and faced the remnants of the mob, even taking hold of a bar of the gate with his naked hand while he spoke. In the courtyard behind him some of his troop, with their fellows of the palace, stood watching curiously, others went stolidly about their business; the clamour of a Roman mob was nothing new.

“You heard what he said at the last? There was sense in it—there will be little pity for a riot on to-night of all nights, with our Holy Father lying dead. Get to your homes before worse comes of it.”

“Worse will not come to us,” cried a voice from the thick of the mob, “it will be worse for that misbegotten whelp of a——”

“Who threatens?” cried Rivara. Catching a firm grasp of the bars over his head he raised himself by force of a muscular arm a full foot from the ground and glared out about the heads of the throng. “Who threatens, I say?” But there was no answer, a silence rather, and he eased himself to the stones again. “Begone for your own sakes,” he said, and left them growling.

It was while Alessandro Pandone was girding at the mob from behind the safe shelter of the barrier gate that a particularly vile epithet flung in reply made the elder girl wince. The next instant she recovered herself and drew Emilia closer to her in the old instinct of protection.

“Let us go in, cousin,” she said, and linked together like sisters or friends of a lifetime, they passed into the house to Rivara’s intense relief.

Under the lamp-light and beyond was such a life as

Bianca had certainly never seen and hardly ever dreamed of as existing—how could she, living alone with Tita and Giuseppi in the poverty of Malazzorbo? Every day Giordano Pandone fed more than a hundred and fifty mouths, not counting the guards or the men-at-arms who served him in the saddle. And yet it was a small household as households went in Rome. Cardinal Giovanni Colonna's was twice as large, that of Cardinal Pelagius, who had been the dead Pope's Legate in Egypt, yet greater.

But to Bianca Pandone, fresh from the mildewed house in the one street of Malazzorbo and Tita and Giuseppi, who served in the fields as well as in the house, it seemed as if she had stepped into a human ant heap, so crowded was the teeming and varied activity. First Cosimo Rivara's return and her own arrival, then that greater whet even than curiosity, the hope of seeing a riot with its bloodshed, the nearest approach to the circus of old left to the Romans, had drawn all the household to the doors as a pot of honey draws flies. They were of many ages and every degree, from the *majordomo* in black velvet, his staff in his hand, his gilt chain of office across breast and shoulders, to the scullion who still dangled the kitchen rags wherewith he had been wiping the pots.

Speaking to none Emilia drew her cousin into the square, flagged hall and up the broad shallow-stepped marble staircase. Twice only she paused; once when they had passed entirely through the throng at the doors, which, however it might jostle each other, did not jostle them, and were in the full light of a dozen lamps hung by chains from brackets, then it was to say, "Cousin Bianca, how beautiful you are; none of our Roman ladies have such a colour." And once, half-way up the stairs, when she touched her cousin's sleeve and skirt, "To-morrow we must change all this; I shall tell my uncle so when he comes back from the Vatican."

"Then he is not in the palace?" asked Bianca.

"No, he was at the Lateran all day, there is so much to be done when a Pope dies. But already the conclave is sitting at the Vatican that the Church may have a head. When our uncle returns——"

"I want nothing of my uncle," interrupted Bianca, open antagonism in her voice.

Ignoring the antagonism Emilia nodded her black head. "I shall see that you get it whether you want it or not! And you will not be sorry. Even this cannot spoil you," and again she touched the despised gown. "But you are a woman, and when you see the difference——" She broke off, once more nodding her black head with an air of great wisdom. Then in a swift, characteristic transition of mood she threw her arms round Bianca. "Oh, how I wish I was a man and seven years older, that I might fall in love with you!"

Stooping, Bianca kissed the upturned, childish face, kissed it with a warmth in her heart she had not thought to find in Rome.

"Little Emilia, let the man's love find you instead, and when it has found you worship it next to God Himself. Perhaps it is looking for you even now?"

As in the courtyard so again now the clip of the arms strained closer, but the answer, if it was an answer at all was oblique, "Cousin Bianca, I am so glad you have come to Rome; you must never go back to Malazzorbo, never."

Already Bianca Pandone was realizing that any desire for Malazzorbo, or rather, any regret, had weakened. For Tita and Giuseppi she had at times through these three days longed with a hunger of heart that was pain, but she was seeing the life of Malazzorbo in its true proportions, and all her eagerness of youth, her full-blooded vitality, her clear, unsatisfied shrewdness of brain, cried out against

the cramping narrowness that forced a whole world into the confines of a single village street.

Here, with every step, she found a new existence broadening out before her, almost a new creation. The Pandones came of a lower middle-class stock, a stock at that time in almost less repute than the actual tiller of the soil; her mother, as she had told Rivara, had been a Caldora, a noble family of some wealth and influence in Southern Italy, but of greater pride than either. That Marco Pandone, her father, had not been taught a bloody repentance for his presumption in winning a bride from the dominant class, may have been due to indifference, or a contemptuous tolerance for a woman's folly not in accordance with the spirit of the age. Or again, the Caldoreschi may have thought that life in Malazzorbo was punishment enough. Whatever the reason, Pandone was left to die in peace, and except for his loss his widow was never heard to complain; in his love she had found contentment.

Giordano Pandone, entering the Church, had won a patron in the previous Pope, Innocent III, dead eleven years ago, and through his influence the young priest's rise had been rapid. To the See of Castallo had followed the Archbishopric of Imola; thence to the purple—those were the days before the Red Hat became the symbol of the Cardinalate—was but a step. His elevation he owed to Honorius.

But grained in the man was a love of display rather than any true sense of the beauty of art, nor, indeed, had the soul of the nation itself wakened to that passionately intense love for the beautiful which possessed it later. It followed, then, that this new world into which Bianca Pandone had stepped was marked chiefly by ostentation and colour—the brass lamps, set in niches or hanging from brackets, were gigantic, the curtains of rich silk, but in brilliant shades ill contrasted, the carvings the work of

mere craftsmen. The sculptures, and there were many, claimed to be antique, but possibly were copies palmed upon Pandone's ignorance, a trade that took root early in Italy and flourishes exceedingly well to this day. The period aped was not the Classic—the Cardinal had no liking for the severity of Classic sculpture—but that of the decay of the Empire, when the cunning use of party-coloured marble was held a greater triumph than dignity of conception or beauty of curved line.

At the head of the stairs Emilia paused. From the courtyard Alessandro's voice could be heard raised in gibe and provocation.

"We shall have supper in your room together, just we two alone. Alessandro may bring his friends with him, and for to-night we can do without them—you are wearied by your journey."

Most thankfully Bianca agreed. Reaction was setting in strongly, and with every minute consciousness of fatigue grew upon her, fatigue not alone of joint and muscle, but also of nerve and brain. But though the need for rest was written broadly in the pallor of the tired face, cunning Emilia had quite another thought in her clever, kindly little head. If Alessandro, to whom nothing was sacred, should see his cousin in her present ill-cut, ill-fitting dress, he would laugh at her as a provincial, would even—being 'Sandro and a law unto himself—fling a sharp-edged gibe with as little heed as he was flinging them now through the bars at the snarling mob. And in Rome gibes killed—sometimes a pretension, sometimes a reputation, sometimes and in very truth the utterer. Alessandro's careless jest would fly abroad as such jests always fly, and this new cousin, to whom Emilia's warm heart had impulsively gone out, would be damned socially before Rome ever saw her in reality; therefore the two girls supped alone.

But weary as Bianca was, sleep sat aloof upon the bed-

foot, and for long would come no nearer. After the first hour the bells, except those of the five Patriarchal churches, had ceased tolling. But these five, ringing their eleven strokes in unison, then ceasing for the space of eleven strokes, only to crash brazenly out afresh, never hasting, never failing, jarred her raw nerves as the incessant reverberations had never done. Add that Rome itself was sleepless all night, like a wild beast upon the prowl. Her window opened upon the central courtyard and through it, muffled but unmistakable, sounded the beat of many feet on the stones of the rough pavement, the roar of many voices dulled by distance to a raucous murmur, but, like the bells, unhasting, unfailing.

“A wild beast,” Bianca thought, “a wild beast caged, but on the prowl in its cage,” and after hours of listening to the bells that ceased only to ring afresh, and the tramp that never ceased, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

THE *SFUMATA*

WHEN Bianca awoke day-light was broad in the room, as broad, that is, as day-light can be where the sun never strikes directly, and the window is little more than the slit of a loophole. But it was not the clearness of the light that roused her from her stupor of fatigue, it was a joyous laugh, ill suppressed; then a grim contradiction to the merriment, the tolling of the bells completed her awakening.

Emilia, again dressed all in white and looking more like a slim, tall child playing in masquerade than a woman, was stooping over the central table. Beside her, also stooping, her sober gown of stuff reaching no further than her ankles and puffed out at the hips like a balloon, was an elder woman whom Bianca came to know later as Lisetta, Emilia's nurse and fanatical worshipper.

At a movement from the bed the girl turned and seeing Bianca awake swept across the floor in the whirlwind rush of the night before.

"Good morning, Cousin Bianca. I was so afraid these terrible bells would never let you sleep, then I was afraid you would wake up too soon, only at last I thought you would never waken at all!"

"Is it so very late?"

"Anything is too late that you do not get at the right moment, and I wanted this just as soon as it might be."

"Wanted what?" Still heavy with sleep, Bianca raised herself on an arm as she spoke, and the movement turned Emilia's thoughts in a new direction.

"Oh, you dear! You too lovely dear! See what hair, Lisetta, coils and coils and coils of it!" Stooping, she caught up the loosened braids, twisted them under Bianca's throat, round her neck, and spread the ends broadly across her bosom. "What will Rome say? How the men will love you and the women hate you! I was wise last night, I only hope I have been as wise this morning, but we did the best we could."

"What have you been doing this morning?"

A mischievous light flashed into the girl's eyes as she sat back on the edge of the bed and held up three fingers, ticking them off as she answered:

"Item, one purple taffeta for the streets; item, one white linen when the days are warm; item, one fawn silk——"

"Taffeta? linen? silk? Emilia, what foolishness are you talking?"

"No foolishness, but woman's wisdom, Cousin Bianca. Stand to one side, Lisetta, that she may see for herself."

The nurse, who had kept her place between the bed and the table, obeyed, a broad smile on her broad, comely face. Laid out in the order of Emilia's items, so displayed that they drooped in folds to the floor, were three costumes, the taffeta and the linen with but little adornment, but the silk so richly bedecked with laces as to complete the sense of the girl's interrupted sentence. Bianca's eyes grew vexed as she understood.

"Where did these come from?"

"All the morning Lisette and I have been hunting gowns. The shops are closed, but——"

"Not hunting gowns for me." It was an assertion, not a question.

"But our uncle would desire it."

"I owe my uncle nothing, not even thanks, and would not wish to. You may send them back whence they came."

At the change so plainly to be read in the elder girl's

face, Emilia had grown troubled, her gladness suddenly quenched; now it sparkled in her eyes afresh. She clapped her hands like a pleased child, laughing the joyous laugh Bianca had heard on awakening.

"Then you will have to spend the rest of your life in bed, Cousin Bianca. The dress you wore last night, and all like it, have disappeared while you slept and won't be found again." Then, with the same childlike impetuosity, she flung herself forward, catching Bianca in her slim, warm arms. "You must wear them; you must, you must, you must. And you will have nothing to thank our uncle for—nothing at all—it is he who must thank Malazorbo for a niece all Rome will fall in love with. Be kind, Cousin Bianca, and I am sure you are not a child of the devil."

"Emilia, what can you mean?"

"Is he not the father of pride? And what else is it but pride that makes you say no? There! You are laughing, so Lisetta and I are forgiven." She sat up, nodding gaily to the nurse. "You may go, Lisetta. See that the bath is ready, and then, for to-day, I shall be tire-woman. Now 'Sandro may bring all Rome an it please him!"

But with all Rome in a ferment Alessandro Pandone found the life of the streets more to his taste than the shuttered quiet of the Palazzo Pandone. At dinner, which was served an hour before noon, the head of the long table which ran the full length of the largest room Bianca had ever seen, was empty, and she, with her cousin, Cosimo Rivara and the Cardinal's domestic chaplain were alone above the salt. Below, grouped together, were six or eight members of the newly-established Dominican and Franciscan Orders, each in his respective black or grey robe. Between them no love was lost. Already they were eyeing one another with that jealousy which, later on, was to drive the two great Brotherhoods into such an antagon-

ism as to warrant the satiric use of the quotation: See how these Christians love one another! A shrewd observer, Giordano Pandone recognised—as the head of the Church did later—the militant value of these foot-soldiers in the great Church Army. Drawn from the people and going back to the people, as they did, in every hamlet and almost every house, their collective influence was far to outweigh that of the regular priesthood, therefore Pandone welcomed them to his table with effusion.

Beyond the friars were half a score of dependants at the moment in Rome from the secular estates of the Cardinalate, if the phrase may be used. As a matter of course they lived at the palace while their stay in the city lasted. Lower down came the household, or as many of them as could be spared, but not including the guards—they were both housed and fed in separate quarters by themselves.

The meal served, though simple, was ample and varied, and—it being the period of the Great Fast—was confined to a first course of eggs cooked in half-a-dozen different ways, a second of freshwater Lenten crabs, then fish, boiled and baked, both from the sea and from Lake Bracciano; it ended with a fourth course of sweets.

A Latin grace was said by the priest both before and after the meal, but there was little conversation, partly because Giordano Pandone was accustomed to set and keep the ball rolling, partly because the indecision of the conclave was in all men's minds; but perhaps most of all because the unfailing tolling of the bells urged to brooding thought rather than talk. At the close all rose but those above the salt, bowed gravely to Emilia Pandone as representing their host, were bowed to in return and, beginning with the household, filed out in silence.

Emilia drew a long breath and puffed it out again.

"Praises be! That's over. I would rather sup lentil

porridge by myself in a chimney corner than sit and watch them gorge! Father Reanada, is there no news from the Conclave?"

"How could there be, signorina, since no communications may pass out to the world until there is a decision."

"Then it is all very dull. Signor Rivara, do you hear? It is all very dull, and my cousin did not come to Rome to be dull."

Rivara hesitated. There was something of appeal, something of command, and not a little of playful wheedling in the complaint. It was true, the streets of Rome were not at their safest; but then, a guard was always possible. Emilia noted the hesitation and grew insistent.

"There is something—and we are missing it! What is the something, Signor Rivara?"

Driven into a corner, Rivara took refuge in a protest that was an evasion.

"The signorina must be tired after her three days' ride."

Promptly Emilia brushed the protest aside. "How little you understand us! No woman is tired when she has a new dress and there is something new to be seen," she declared. "Am I not right, Cousin Bianca? What is the something, Signor Rivara?"

"The Conclave is sitting at the Vatican, at any moment the announcement may be made——"

"And we may hear it? Come, Cousin Bianca, let us not lose an instant. Who knows but it may be our uncle?" But at the door she paused. "How must we go?"

"On foot, signorina."

"And I shall see nothing, I am so small!" Then a laugh flickered into her black eyes. "But you can hold me up—you are so strong! I hear you climbed half-way up the gate when they called us ugly names last night, 'Sandro and me. Thank you, Signor Rivara."

At the half laughing but wholly earnest praise Cosimo

Rivara flushed like a girl. With all his heart he prayed that the name called from the balcony to the waiting crowd packing the forecourt of Saint Peter's would not be that of Giordano Pandone. Small as was his hope of being accepted willingly as a titular nephew by the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte, it would be the madness of folly to expect a favourable answer from an ambitious Pope. That he, Rivara, was of better blood than any Pandone, would go for nothing. Emilia would have become too valuable a pawn in the great game of family aggrandizement to be wasted upon him; nothing short of a crown, or a crown presumptive, would be considered, and Italy had petty principalities by the score.

For the moment he was Pandone's right hand and most trusted confidant; of that his late mission was proof. In his three weeks' absence he had visited Imola to collect the accumulated revenues of the archdiocese, a task calling for some skill, much discretion and not a little courage—neither His Eminence nor the paying of ecclesiastical dues was popular in Imola. And Rivara had succeeded beyond expectations. Because of that success he had hoped some more important mission would be entrusted to him, out of which he might pluck advancement. Then had come the death of the ailing Honorius; should Giordano Pandone succeed him as Pope the secretary's dream was at an end. He could hope for no advancement that would entitle him to stand at the stool of St. Peter's chair.

His preparations for the streets were no more than completed when the cousins joined him in the courtyard. Over their indoor costumes stout hooded cloaks had been thrown, Bianca's borrowed from she knew not whom. In Rome March winds blow coldly at times, and, however pleasant the sun, the nipping air of the narrow, shaded streets made the protection not only grateful but almost necessary.

Rivara had ordered a guard of six, armed with pikes; three marched ahead, three behind. He himself wore his sword and saw to it that it hung loose in the scabbard. Though more scholar than soldier, he could use more forcible arguments than words when needs must, and he who was not ready for that need at an instant's notice, did not know his Rome as Rivara knew it.

To Bianca here again was a new world, but now the ant-heap was a hive where the bees buzzed angrily. Nor were they all bees. There were hornets from north and south, wasps who preyed for a living upon whatever fruit hung ripe and exposed to attack; blood-sucking Zinzaris that stole while one slept, and, no less pestiferous, the swarms of blow-flies always to be found where a crowded city piles high its moral garbage in reeking lanes and foul blind alleys.

Through this thronging turmoil of nobles with their score or more of armed followers to force a free passage for their lordship through the press, of soldiers of fortune drawn to Rome by the lure of party strife as the carcass draws the eagles, of sober citizens loosed from their shops by this holiday of death's proclaiming, of ecclesiastics by the score, from the purple of the crozier to the black soutane of the humblest curate, of friars in grey, friars in black, lay brethren, loiterers, vagabonds, thieves and worse, Rivara's guards pushed their way unhasting, unhalting, like the bells still clanging their eleven strokes. Being only three they pushed civilly, content with slow progress. More than once Rivara, upon the outside as they walked three abreast with Emilia on his right, wished with all his heart that Alessandro Pandone was beyond Bianca, then in the same pulse thanked heaven he was not. 'Sandro would assuredly have hatched a quarrel before they had gone a furlong.

Except the open space as they crossed the Tiber, Bianca

recognised nothing of the previous night's reverse journey, until, the crowd growing thicker, rougher and more clamorous with every yard, she caught sight of a domed campanile which she knew to be the bell tower of St. Peter's. Towards this, or rather a little to its left, where a long and broad flight of shallow steps gave approach to a wide-flung façade pierced by many arches, the dense throng was slowly forcing its way. To her it seemed as if half Rome, and that half drawn chiefly from the dens and rookeries of the city, must have been packed within the flanking colonnades between whose many pillars they made their passage.

The guards were now of but little service, but the crowd, for all its doubtful character, was good-humored and too dense for horse-play. Up the steps, Rivara now in the centre, an arm linked with each, they mounted at a crawl, their progress impeded by a meeting stream which forced an opposite passage through the three huge doors facing the centre of the steps. The buzz of talk was like the soft roar of distant waters, where out of the conflict of many voices is blent a hoarse harmony, and above this murmurous sea clanged the mighty monotone of the tolling bell.

Presently they penetrated to the fore-court, a broad quadrangle surrounded by covered cloister walks, and again recognition came to Bianca. There, on her right, was the grey-brown pile Rivara had called the Vatican, and that—her heart leaped in her bosom as she understood—that was surely Saint Peter's itself looking down upon her across the further end of the court! Saint Peter's of the thousand hallowed years of worship, the Holy of Holies of the Western Church, the Christian Pantheon where the mighty dead of the ages slept their last sleep.

For another three hundred years that grey pile was to stand, the shrine and magnet of religious fervour to Christendom at large, a mausoleum more sacred with every cen-

tury; then it was to pass away utterly—to the very foundations, and above the waste space was to rise another shrine, more magnificent perhaps, more capacious, more marvellous in its building, but not more glorious, nor more reverend in its sacred associations. The Saint Peter's of to-day is not the Saint Peter's of Honour; of it not one stone stands in its ancient place, nor is the Vatican the pile to which the crowd turned expectant faces.

So direct and universal was the gaze, so eager the attention, so notable the growing silence settling in an expectant hush upon the vast throng, that both girls involuntarily turned to Rivara, who now stood behind them. But his only answer to the mute question was an almost impatient shake of the head, nor did he lower his intent gaze from the grey-brown turrets and gables cutting the sky-line above the northern cloisters where every face was turned.

The hush grew in intensity to a pain; it was a silence that might be felt. Out of all that upturned sea of living faces hardly so much as a breath seemed to issue. Then, at Bianca's elbow, a voice broke out in an unconscious whisper. It was a priest who spoke, a man old before his time, lean of face, hollow-eyed, ascetic, the flesh worn to extinction by the fierceness of the inner spiritual fires.

"The greatest thing in the world—the greatest—the greatest. To kill or to make alive; to shut and none can open; to open and none may shut—none—none. Stoop down, thou Holy Spirit, stoop down and speak!"

Bianca's skin crept upon her. Never before had she realised the tremendous greatness of the issues in the balance behind that grey-brown wall—the very Spirit of God was there present to choose for Himself a new Vicar of Christ, a new Vicegerent of the Almighty to grasp the Keys of Saint Peter, a new power to bind or loose, to condemn or pardon, to bring peace upon earth or a sword. Small wonder that even a Roman crowd was awed to silence.

And then as, mechanically, uncomprehendingly, shivering within herself, she watched as those about her watched, a spiral of smoke went up, thin and grey at first but growing rapidly to a dense, black column, and over the wide-flung crowd there broke a ripple of life in a long-drawn, universal *Ah-h-h!* like the sigh of some huge monster that has slept and dreams in its sleep. And swiftly, in the same breath, Rome was Rome again. As if swayed by the one impulse, the whole quadrangle surged with movement, awe and reverence were flung off, and the brooding, mystical silence shattered by a thousand raucous tongues, most of them ribald.

"Then Montelengo the Goat has another chance yet!"

"Why can't they agree! It's each for himself, I suppose."

"Pandone's money-bags came a day too late or they would have settled it out of hand!"

"Spirit of the living God, grant them wisdom!"

"Put them on bread and water and they will soon come to a vote."

"Oh, hé! 'Rico! 'Rico! This is poor sport. Make for the bridge and wait there for me."

These, and a score of cries like them. No doubt it was in part reaction, the slackening of a tension strained almost to breaking point, but in spirit it was Rome—one moment awed to a reverent silence, thrilled through and through with dumb emotion, and given up the next to coarse jests, gibes, gross foulness and empty laughter. Bewildered, Bianca again turned to Rivara with her mute demand.

"The *Sfumata*," he explained. "Every third hour from eleven in the forenoon they burn damp straw as a signal that there is no election as yet. It was that the crowd watched for—the smoke—the *Sfumata*."

"And will there be no election now till five?"

"It may come at any moment, but every third hour they say to the world: Not yet!"

CHAPTER VI

IN OLD SAINT PETER'S

MEANWHILE the mob had thinned, pouring out in a triple stream through the great archways that gave upon the colonnades leading to the Tiber and the Bridge of Sant' Angelo. The huge *atrium* was now two-thirds empty and Rivara was concerned to find that in the confusion they had become separated from their guards; the rabble, in its new mood of rough jesting was, or might be, dangerous.

And Bianca's next question: "Why do they say Montelengo, the Goat?" proved the danger. For, as Rivara hesitated how to answer without offence, a burly loafer, one of a group of four standing near, overheard and broke in with a guffaw of laughter.

"Why? Because he carries his cageful of pretty dears, his *bona-robas* with him wherever he goes, just as if he was the Emperor himself, that's why. Where do you come from that you don't know Montelengo the Goat? Let's see your face," and he made as if to push back the hood that covered her head.

But quick and sudden as was the gesture of offence a bystander was quicker still, catching the truculent ruffian by the throat and flinging him staggering amongst his fellows before ever Rivara had stirred to interfere.

"Back to your kennel, cur. What? Draw a knife would you? Tcha! We are two to your four—you are out-matched. Be off, lest your dues are paid you."

There was an instant's hesitation, a moment in which murder raised its head and glared; but Rivara had stridden

forward, his sword half-drawn, and with a growl, part curse, part vile abuse, the bullies drew back. The stranger turned to Rivara.

"Was it wise, signor—ladies in such a place and at such a time?"

"We have guards," answered Rivara, "but for the moment we have lost them in the crowd."

"Then for the moment let me in part supply their place." Though he spoke to Rivara his eyes wandered to Bianca, but it was Emilia, the impulsive, who answered.

"Signor, it must be splendid to be so strong. Signor Rivara would have done the same but we prevented him. The Cardinal of San Marco del Monte will himself thank you when the Conclave is ended."

"Ah! The Signorina Pandone?" He looked from the cousins to Rivara and back again to the hooded cloaks. "Years ago there was a Marco Pandone who married——"

"My mother," interrupted Bianca.

Baring his head he bowed, smiling. "Then, signorina, I have the honour to be a cousin——"

Again she interrupted him, her voice almost as hard as when she had told Rivara her story of four years past. "I have long ago forgotten that I had cousins in the south, and now I do not care to remember."

"Ah, signorina," he protested, unoffended by the will to offend; there was even a whimsical good humour in his pleasant southern voice with its soft inflexions, "had you been my sister you could have scorned me properly, but I am so far-off a cousin that there can be no bitterness in the blood. My grand-mother was a Caldora." He turned to Rivara: "My name is Alvano; am I enlisted as additional guard for the hour, signor?"

Looking round him Rivara hesitated. The men-at-arms had vanished utterly, hopelessly lost in the ebb and flow of cross currents sweeping through the *atrium*. As the

day drew on the streets would grow still more unsafe and not simply from the type of ruffians Alvano had discomfited. License would increase, Alessandro Pandones and Rinaldis would be abroad in plenty, more impudent, more reckless and more aggressive. On the other hand: Trust the stranger you know and no other, was a wise proverb. It was Emilia who swept aside his hesitation as the wind scatters vapour.

"If you will guard your cousin, I shall be quite safe with Signor Rivara."

"Signorina, it will be twenty years arrears of duty and pleasure."

Emilia shook her head until the hood almost fell back upon her shoulders. "Ah, signor, you are truly from the south, that's easily seen. Rome does not coin pretty phrases so readily. Now, Signor Rivara, am I not clever? I have settled it all. Let us go."

But Rivara, though he would have been more than human not to be content with the allotted division of responsibility, still hesitated. The four bullies, part beggar, part thief, part bravo, whole scum of Rome's recurrent turbulence, had retired no further than the eastern cloisters. To gather twice or thrice their number and force a quarrel at the mouth of some laneway, where their own kind held sway in defiance of all the powers of law, would be easy. Discretion was wisdom, as it is nineteen times in twenty; the twentieth time is the birth-hour of heroes.

"Let us go by way of the church," said Rivara. "Signorina Bianca has never seen Saint Peter's."

And so, five minutes later, Bianca Pandone, who felt not at all at peace with the world, because of this new cousin who had forced her mother's wrongs of neglect upon her memory, found herself in a world of peace, another new world, the third of her finding in the less than twenty-four hours since she had come to Rome. She had passed through

the doors—not Filarete's bronze doors, still to be found under Moderna's portica; it is true they come from the old church, but not the church of Bianca Pandone—with a tumult of rebellious bitterness swelling in her heart. There was indignation against the Caldoreschi, root and branch, resentment against her uncle, vexation at this undesired intrusion; but as the heavy leathern curtain shut out the glare an awe fell upon her—here was no place for the hot passions of the world.

The vast church was almost empty of worshippers. Here and there a single figure knelt in the distant shadow of a pillar; here and there a little group paused before some wonder of bronze or mosaic, some exquisitely delicate tracery of carving or austere dignity of marble, some priceless reliquary enshrining that which was yet further beyond price. The air was sweet with incense, as if the breath of a by-gone praise still lingered; the only voice the voice of prayer murmured from some far-off, hidden altar, a voice gentle, calm, and subdued, yet rolling to the very raftered roof of the high-pitched nave.

Alvano, at her shoulder, caught something of her changed spirit.

“Was I to blame, cousin, I who did not know?”

Her only answer was a little fluttering shake of an open hand, but in her heart she knew the grudge had died—who could cry aloud a petty passion in the face of this rebuking quietude?

Though afternoon was at its prime the great church was dim, the lights from the clerestory hardly rousing shadows in the further aisles, broken as it was by the double row of massive columns on either side. Like a forest they seemed to Bianca, these columns of many coloured marbles, almost one hundred in number. Their story was the story of Rome itself. Of old the fires of Pagan sacrifices had burned before them, and through their aisles had rung

hymns to the many gods of the ancient city. But now the Powers of Violence had yielded up their spoils to the service of the Prince of Peace, and through a thousand years of sacred use that which had been profanation had grown holy.

Something of Rivara's reverent love and worship, emotions not in themselves religious, woke in her as she listened to his whispered story.

There, behind that inscription which relates the story of England's conversion to The Faith, Gregory the Great had slept his peaceful sleep six hundred years; in that sarcophagus of red granite lay Adrian IV., of all the long line of Popes the only Englishman who ever sat in Saint Peter's chair. Within that glory of mosaic and porphyry rested the boy Emperor, Otho; there Crescentius, Senator of Rome, hewn to death in Sant' Angelo by order of that same Otho, found the peace his turbulent spirit never gave the flesh in its lifetime; near by in the irony of history lay his ancient enemy, Gregory the Fifth, a Pope at five-and-twenty and dead within two years.

Upon all or most of these the mellowing breath of antiquity had blown, but here was marble newly hewn, garish almost, in its raw whiteness. Within it lay Innocent III., he whom Honorius had succeeded, Honorius, whose knell the bell at the corner of the *atrium* without still tolled in its eleven strokes. A great Pope, Innocent, said Rivara, with enthusiasm, and a great lover of this his church; that mosaic of our Lord above the Confessio was his gift, also the bronze grille, marvellous in its workmanship, which enclosed the forefront of the tomb—let this be added, as it stood in the old church so it stands at this day in the new.

And there, in that sunken sepulchre surrounded by these twelve columns of white Tyrian marble, lay the bones of the great martyred Apostle who had died in Nero's Circus.

Commonly a hundred lamps burned round the tomb, but now these were quenched in the Church's mourning for her head upon earth; one single wick only was alight, type of that Glorious Hope the Grace of God never suffers to fail for our human comforting, even in the heaviest sorrow.

That spiral shaft, also of white marble, fluted, and wreathed with carvings, standing between the tomb and the high altar, was the Colonna Santa, the pillar against which Christ had leaned as He disputed with the doctors in Solomon's Temple. And there, midway to the door, was the bronze statue of the Apostle himself; through six centuries——

Suddenly Alvano laid a hand on Rivara's arm, checking him in mid-speech.

"Hush! Listen!" he said. "The bell has stopped."

It was true. Across the incessant hum from the courtyard came the burr of the vibrating metal, but the tolling had ceased, struck dumb midway through its monotonous count. In the distance there still sounded the united pealing from the Lateran and Santo Paolo in the south, Santo Lorenzo and Santa Maria Maggiore in the east, then, warned by the silence of Saint Peter's, it, too, ceased. For such a space of time as eleven strokes might be struck, Rivara paused, listening, his face intent in the greyness. But the silence remained unbroken; without doubt the burr from beyond the quadrangle was dying down.

"Come," he said briefly. Catching Emilia under the arm, without ceremony, he hurried her towards the doors, nor did he speak until they had reached the portico and the curtain had flapped into its place behind them.

"The Conclave is ended; the world has a new Pope, and in five minutes we shall hear his name."

Again he paused, looking out doubtfully across the vast court. Once again it seemed to Bianca as if half the city

must be pouring through the triple arches at the further end, so dense were the streams of struggling humanity. So, possibly, in the old days had Rome poured down the sacred way to the Circus, when Cæsar, of his grace, threw the show open to the populace. The spirit was still the same. Death in the arena; the Vicegerent of the Prince of Peace in the *atrium*; what did it matter which, so long as Rome was thrilled to its unstable heart by something new?

Again Alvano touched Rivara's arm. "There—by the fountain, while there is time," he said with curt decision. "At least we cannot be caught between a backward and a forward pressure, but lose no time," and Rivara nodded approval. Alvano, with a soldier's eye, had seized upon a point of vantage.

That, truly, was a wild dash. Once more Rivara had Emilia by the arm, nor did Bianca resent that through the jostling eddies of that confused and shifting sea, callous and careless as ocean itself, this unknown cousin guided her in like fashion. Nor did he give her guidance only. Time and again his arm and shoulder kept her safe from hurt, warding off the blind, heedless onset of the seething crowd. His strength, foresight, and swiftness of action compelled her admiration. Now it was a dive through an opening lane in the throng, now a dexterous twist to one side or the other, now a thrust of the shoulder to force a passage, but always with a gay word or nod, a jest, a laughing deprecation that disarmed resentment even while he gained his object at another's cost.

In the end they were the first to reach the goal, Bianca breathless but elate, and with the blood coursing joyously through her veins as it had not run since she was a child; Malazzorbo seemed half a generation distant. Presently Emilia and Rivara joined them and together they waited,

the cousins behind against the fountain, Alvano and Rivara in front keeping back the crush.

With a rapidity inconceivable the great quadrangle had filled up afresh, filled to bursting point had that been possible. Again the crowd was very silent, but it was a silence with a difference. Then it had seemed as if they drew no breath, as if their very hearts had ceased to beat in the sharp tension of expectancy—it was the stillness of death; now it was the stillness of life, and the air throbbed as with a universal, feverish pulse.

Behind, the fountain splashed, gushing from that huge core of bronze pine which may still be seen in the Vatican gardens, but in all the *atrium* there was no definite sound, no outcry. Then a window near the angle of the church was opened, a cross thrust out, and a figure in scarlet stepped upon the balcony, a note of vivid colour against the prevailing greyness.

“Otho,” said Rivara, under his breath, “Otho, who was Legate in England and is now Camerlengo.”

The silence deepened to the old painful, strained intensity as the Cardinal raised his hand, leaning forward on the balcony rail.

“Let the world rejoice!” he said, his thin voice reaching clearly to the furthest colonnade. “God has been very gracious to His Church. He has given her for chief pastor and head the most eminent Cardinal Ugolino Conti, who shall be known henceforth as Gregory the Ninth.” Again he raised his hand, this time with three fingers extended in benediction, and for a brief space the spell of silence held its sway. Then he stepped back into the room behind him, the cross was withdrawn, and as the window closed, babel broke loose.

But this time Bianca Pandone was unconscious of the tumult; the two men before her caught and held her attention. Rivara’s pent breath had gone from him in a faint

"Thank God!" but Alvano stood rigid, his eyes still fixed upon the empty balcony yet seeing neither it nor the surging crowd between. It was as if his mind was leagues away, or his thoughts concentrated upon an urgent, vital problem whose solution evaded him. But the sudden clashing out of a joy-peal from the campanile, in the angle of the courtyard, roused him—a joy-peal caught up and echoed by every church bell in Rome, till the air throbbed with the brazen reverberation.

"Ugolino Conti!" he repeated, half vacantly. "That old grey wolf to follow Honourous? Then there's an end to peace in Italy."

CHAPTER VII

CARDINAL PANDONE RETURNS FROM THE CONCLAVE

IT was through a Rome of excited streets, the bells still clanging from every monastery, every church tower, every religious house owing spiritual allegiance to the Church, that Cardinal Giordano Pandone returned to his palace, whither Rivara and his party had preceded him an hour earlier without incident.

He rode in an open double litter, ten men at arms before him, and ten behind, his personal chaplain humbly on a lower seat at his left hand. Because of the crowd progress was slow, and at every halt His Eminence was ready with his benediction for whosoever seemed in the least to desire it.

Nor had he far to look for the devout. Apart from the natural respect attaching to his office, an office haloed, so to speak, in a new reverence as one in whom the Spirit of Divine Wisdom had lately moved, Giordano Pandone was popular for a double reason—he was carefully liberal, generous even, and women, who count for much in religion, or, perhaps, in religiosity, thought him an ideal prelate.

Tall, but not over-tall, not even his loose purple robe could conceal the graceful, slim proportions of a figure unspoilt by close upon fifty years of life, and a frank enjoyment of the good things of this world. Honourous, who had made him Cardinal, had worn a beard, therefore, so said his detractors, Giordano Pandone wore one also; but whereas the Pope's had been small and sparse, the growth of unstudied carelessness, that of Giordano Pan-

done was the child of much thought. It descended magnificently upon his breast, the lacing of silver through the glossy blackness adding that touch of venerableness his comely, youthful face, and no less youthful vigour, denied him. Later, Bianca Pandone told herself that he wore just such a beard to hide a mouth which might have seemed to deny his accepted reputation; but Bianca having been brought up in the narrow groove of Malazzorbo, could not claim to be a judge of character, certainly not a character so complex as the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte.

Round the palace gate the strolling idlers had thickened to a curious mob, and having descended from his litter Giordano Pandone addressed them from the shelter of the archway. It was his voice that had first attracted Innocent, it was so soft yet so sonorous, so rich and full yet capable of such modulation; there were those who said that to hear the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte speak was to hear music. Many a time it had stood him in good stead; men, but chiefly women, forgot the matter in the manner, the sense in the sound.

"In the midst of death we are in life—the hand that smites heals; the correction that wounds binds up our bleeding. To the tenderness of Honorius succeeds the strong love of a Gregory—to ripened wisdom a wisdom already ripe. Rome holds no truer lover than His Holiness. Let those who would judge something of his large heart, and carry more than a memory home with them, gather near San Marco and Sant' Adriano on the day of the procession. In honour of the most happy election, where the Will of the Spirit was never more manifest, I dedicate one hundred solidi to Rome here and now—See to it, Maggiordomo, see to it," and with a commanding gesture to the solemn functionary in black velvet he entered the courtyard, but faced round, with a gracious wave of a white hand, to deprecate the plaudits which

acknowledged his generosity. "*Eviva* Pandone! Long live His Eminence! God send us such a Pope!" Then, half resting on Rivara's shoulder, he turned again into the court, smilingly responding to the respectful greetings of his household upon either side.

"Yes, my friends, yes; a great deliverance—the manifest Will of the Spirit, blessed be God. In whom else of us all can be found such piety, such learning, such love of the Church, such love of the people—um, I will sup in my own apartments to-night; there is much need for rest and meditation." They had now reached the isolation of the staircase, and the pressure on Rivara's shoulder increased as the rich voice took on a deeper note. "You were late? I expected you at least a week ago."

"There was delay at Imola, Father; persuasion was needed——"

"Yes, yes," the interruption was impatience itself. "But you succeeded?"

"Beyond expectations, Father."

"That is good; but had you returned a week ago—no! I don't think that would have made any difference in the election. Are Emilia and Alessandro well? Ah! there is my little Emilia; 'Sandro, I suppose, is—wherever it pleases 'Sandro!" Stooping he kissed with evident warmth of affection the face upturned to his. "And what mischief has my dove found out for herself these two days past?"

"Spending money, uncle!" and she laughed joyously.

"Oh, ho!" The arm laid about her shook her playfully as they continued their slow ascent. "It is well Rivara did not come back from Imola with empty pockets or I would be ruined. Spending money on what?"

"To buy dresses for cousin Bianca," and she laughed again, laughed gleefully, as a child laughs.

"Um—cousin Bianca?" The Cardinal half paused

upon a landing, the playful banter dying from his face. "I had forgotten cousin Bianca."

"Yes, uncle, you have forgotten her far too long. And now you must bring three or four princes and grand dukes, young and handsome and rich, that I may choose the very nicest as a husband for her; nothing less is fit. If I had been a man, or if 'Sandro were old enough——"

"Thank heaven there is a 'no' to both 'ifs'! And as for you, child, be content as you are."

"That is what she told me—see how wise she is, almost as wise as you! No! that's not possible. You are so wise I was afraid they would make you Pope. Old Annetta in the flower market said they were sure to!"

"Cardinal Ugolino is much wiser," he answered, then added reflectively: "it is true he is more than eighty years old."

"An old grey wolf," said Emilia, nodding her black head wisely.

Pandone started, wrenching himself apart from the two on whom he leaned. They had halted on the stair-head, and, sudden fear in his eyes, he looked apprehensively up and down the corridor. Because of the narrow windows lamps were already alight, though day was still abroad in the streets, but no one was in sight. "Child, child, you must not say such things. Who put such a phrase as that into your mouth? Was it Alessandro?"

"Oh, no," she answered, half frightened by his vehemence, "not 'Sandro."

"Who then, who?"

"I heard it somewhere—I have forgotten where." It is to be feared that her memory was better than she admitted, but the offender—clearly there was offence though she had meant none—was Bianca's newly-found cousin and she was loyal to Bianca. She now used her as a way of

escape from questioning. "Are you not coming to see cousin Bianca?"

"Bianca has waited more than twenty years, let her wait twelve hours longer," he answered drily. "To-night I am fatigued." Lifting her face to his he kissed her. The old tenderness had returned, but his attempt at playful banter was a failure. "God bless my girl; when it comes to princes and grand dukes there is someone else to be thought of besides Bianca. Come, Rivara." But, his under lip pushed out, he stood watching her as long as she was in sight. "An old grey wolf! Who can have taught her that phrase? It is too apt for chance."

But as Emilia was loyal to Bianca so was Rivara loyal to Emilia. "We were in the courtyard of Saint Peter's when the election was announced; a bystander used the words."

"In the courtyard? In the midst of that unwashed rabble? Was it safe?"

"She wished to go, Father; and we had guards."

"She wished to hear the announcement? I see, I see. Yes, I think she loves her old uncle a little. A bystander? That does not look like a popular election; Rome has a way of blurting out the truth at times. Give me your arm, Rivara, I am tired."

His Eminence said no more than the truth when he complained that he was in need of rest. For four-and-twenty hours he had been stretched on the rack of passionate, eager expectation, the ambition of a lifetime at his finger tips, but always just beyond grasp, and few things raw the nerves like desire at a white heat. It is always passion, not work nor the drudging stress of labour, but passion of any kind, be it hate or love, hope, fear or greed, that bites into a man as acid bites into copper, leaving its indelible impression.

Overwrought, Pandone leaned back in a deep chair, his

eyes closed, his silken beard sweeping his breast. If he spoke it was because, his nerves still tingling, speech was a relief; it eased the fret of silent thought.

"A day to age a man—Honorius has the best of it. Not an hour, not a moment, but has torn at the vitals since Otho leaned across the bed, the little silver mallet in his hand. How still the room was! As still as the white face on the pillow. Three times he called him by his Christian name, tapping him on the forehead with every call! Cencius! Cencius!—Cencius! But there was no answer; how could there be? And he turned to the eight or ten of us gathered round. 'His Holiness is truly dead,' he said, and at a motion from his hand, seen through an open door, the De Profundis rose from the adjoining chamber. Aye—Honorius has the best of it."

He sat silent, and his mind shifted from the one great issue of the past day, the passing of a Pope, to that other which was the first's sequence, the naming of his successor.

"There were nineteen in the Conclave—thirteen votes were needed to elect to the greatest power in the world. At the first trial there were five for Pelagius, Conti received six, I equalled Pelagius, and there were three scattering; five votes—five only—and it required thirteen to elect." Easing his head in the chair he opened his eyes and glanced at Rivara standing by the table.

"Sit down, man, sit down," he said testily. "There is no need for ceremony—yet; Conti is Pope. Five—six—five—so was it last night and so was it this morning. Then two of the single votes were cast for Conti—Colonna's doing, it was Colonna who fought for him, I could see that and I knew why. Conti is of the nobles, so is Colonna—I am of the people." His full voice, rich even in its fatigue, roughened. "The people! It is not always wise to make light of the people—not in Rome! But that

made the vote five—eight—five, and I saw Montelengo grow thoughtful.”

“Montelengo?” said Rivara.

“Montelengo, yes, Montelengo—Montelengo and I were agreed. Montelengo—but that does not matter. Again they took a vote, but they clung like limpets, and again there was the five—eight—five, with the one scattered vote. It was then they burnt the damp straw at two o’clock, and while it smoked Montelengo went across to Colonna. Then I knew——” He paused, half a breath as it were, like a man who steadies his nerve. “I knew that I must wait. Montelengo was right; my day was not yet. I love peace as Honorius loved peace, and a fiercer, more aggressive, more assertive, hotter tempered Pope may better suit the needs of the moment. And Gregory is beyond four score—beyond four score, fiery heat, and the unbridled passion of twenty, soon burn out the little that remains to the flesh. The Crusade is in doubt; that is a fret of itself. The Emperor needs a curb, if not a master. Gregory will give him both—or strive to! That means war—war in Apulia, war in the Marches, war in Lombardy, war north and south, and perhaps later the Church will be glad of peace again. Yes, I agree that from every point Montelengo was right—the friends of Pelagius might have forestalled him and established a claim. Where should I have been then? But they did not; at the next vote Conti was elected by fourteen voices—Pelagius had still his faithful five. Montelengo was certainly right—with war at our doors and Gregory beyond four score it is better as it is.”

Rivara sat silent. Perhaps that cry: Grant them wisdom, Spirit of the Living God! was in his ears, perhaps it was the Cardinal’s exhortation at the palace doors; perhaps he asked himself how a man of Montelengo’s reputation, a notorious evil-liver, came to be associated with Pandone. In any case the time did not seem propitious

for the mooting of his own heart's desire, and it was a relief from an embarrassment when servants entered to prepare the table for supper.

As they closed the door, their ministrations ended for the time; Pandone roused himself.

"Tell me of your mission—you say it was successful?"

He listened with acute attention while Rivara related the history of his visit to Imola—the scanty collection already in the Cathedral coffers in anticipation of his coming, the excuses made, the difficulties raised, the flat refusals, all conspiring to compel that delay of a week his patron had lamented. By a curt question, or the simple dropping of a name from time to time, Pandone filled out the narrative. As Rivara, at the last, gave the sum total resulting from his diplomacy, the Cardinal's face lightened a little of its gloom.

"A miracle! Blood from stones! You are wasted here in this cramped life, Cosimo; you should be with one of Emilia's princes or grand dukes." He paused, the reference reminded him of Bianca. "That girl may go back whence she came, she is too late; Honorius should have lived another three months! If he had lived, and she had sense, Colonna might have come to Montelengo, and—Pish! of what use words! We plan and foresee, building on a foundation of 'ifs,' and at a breath—or want of it—our 'ifs' are in ruins. Honorius is dead and Gregory is in his place. She is too late; let her go back whence she came."

"She has certainly sense," said Rivara, "and the Signorina Emilia, who is a better judge of such things than I, vows she will set all young Rome by the ears."

"Eh? She has looks then?"

"Certainly she has looks." Rivara had two objects clear in his mind—to gratify Emilia, who would be heart-broken to lose her newly-found cousin, and to repay Bianca

for more than one act of kindly consideration where Emilia was concerned; it was not probable that having just left Malazzorbo she yearned to return there within a week. He had no idea what lay in the Cardinal's mind, but—again probably—just as he did not wish her to be a fool neither would he desire her to be a Gorgon. Pandone's next words proved him right.

“Sense and looks? Then had Honorius lived three months longer I would have won—if the sense is the right sense. But now!” he smote his palms on the chair-arms in a passion of vexation, “now the ‘ifs’ are in ruins and it is too late; the election is lost.” Suddenly he sat up, his eyes fixed on Rivara but blind to Rivara as his mind flew to a speculation that swept far beyond the walls of the Palazzo Pandone. “Too late?” he repeated, interrogation in his tone, “perhaps not—perhaps not. Ugolino Conti—Gregory—is eighty years old and more—No! perhaps it is not too late. Eighty years old? Eighty? There is still a possibility; to-morrow I must see this Bianca.”

CHAPTER VIII

A FAMILY GATHERING

WITH the joy peals ceasing at sunset Rome had, for that night at least, relief from the tolling of bells.

And to the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte the relief was doubly welcome—it not only made his sleep possible, but there was an end to the clamorous reminder that he had failed. Yet even while he acknowledged to himself the bitterness of that failure, he was not wholly dissatisfied. Montelengo had acted wisely. There would have been no defection from Conti's followers, and without at least three of their votes there was no hope of his own election, since he might not vote for himself.

It had been, therefore, a choice between the election of Conti and a deadlock—a deadlock which the supporters of Pelagius might at any moment have broken. But Montelengo, astutely looking ahead, as every wise man should do when the present fails him, had anticipated them, and Montelengo was certainly right. It had been an act of true statecraft, since by one stroke the new Pope and the Church at large had been placed under a debt to the party of Pandone. During Gregory's lifetime, or after, that debt would be paid—Gregory was fourscore and over; seven-and-forty could afford to wait, and Bianca need not, after all, return whence she had come. Such was the summing up of his mature deliberations.

It was the Cardinal's custom to begin the day with a visit from the brother and sister, and the morning after the election brought no variation from the habit. In that

hour of familiar intercourse he learned many things his shrewdness could turn to account—from Emilia, the news of the household and the chatter of other girls of her age, bushels of chaff never without their kernels of solid grain; from Alessandro, the gossip of his fellows, the pranks, the quarrels, the love affairs and lighter intrigues of Rome, straws on the wind to show the drift of currents which might fill a prospering sail.

But on this morning Emilia could not get beyond her cousin—it was Bianca this, Bianca that, Bianca with every sentence until at last Pandone, half vexed, half playfully, bade her fetch this wonderful Bianca and bring her in a quarter of an hour. Then, as Emilia left the room he turned to Alessandro:

“What of this white swan your sister is so full of?”

“Red, not white, from all I hear,” answered the lad, “but to tell the truth I have not seen her. Two nights ago she was tired and supped alone with Emilia; next day I dined with Giro de Benincasa——”

“Benincasa? Nephew to the Senator?”

“Yes, uncle.”

“That is wise. Make friends upon all sides, enemies on none; Benincasa may be useful. And then?”

Alessandro appeared embarrassed. “We supped—Oh, I forget where we supped, but it was not at the Palazzo, so I failed to see my cousin.”

“Was that the night there was some question of kissing a wench at the Vico del Falcone?”

‘Sandro flushed hotly. “Rivara has been talking! I warned him not to meddle——”

“Rivara has said never a word. Do you think I do not know what goes on in Rome? How else could I hold my place? As to the girl, kiss whom you will, boy, but when the Tiber’s in spate leave the Tiber alone. A corpse

was washed up yesterday morning at the Ponte Rotto beyond the island."

For a moment young Pandone looked shocked, then he recovered himself with a shrug of the shoulders. "They should know how to swim, these river-side folk. Besides, uncle, it was not my doing. There were six of us——"

"Yes, but they traced you here and so will cry Pandone! Pandone! Pandone! forgetting the other five. There must be an end to these public follies, 'Sandro. There is too much at stake. I cannot afford to have the name of Pandone cursed in the lanes of Rome." Rising, he laid a hand on the boy's shoulder, and side by side they paced the room, the younger with a full, red lip pushed out in rebellion. The pressure of the hand, never a minatory pressure, tightened, "Yes, yes, I know—I am old and you are young, and the youth in you cries out that my age forgets it was ever young. Youth, you say, is the greatest thing in the world! But you are wrong. Every age brings its own greatness with it. Forgotten? No! Age that forgets its youth is never a wise age. And my age has not forgotten—I am not such a fool but I know youth must be served. Of that I do not complain. Let Rome curse, but let the name be Savelli—Rinaldi—anything but Pandone. And do not make light of Rome; Rome seems to forget and then remembers when least desired—that is Rome's way. Ah! this must be your cousin Bianca. You are rested after your journey to Rome, I hope, my child? I am your uncle and this is your cousin, Alessandro."

Disengaging himself from Alessandro, the Cardinal held out his hand as he spoke, and Bianca, stooping, kissed the amethyst ring on his third finger. In the last few days she had often asked herself how she should greet this forgetful relative who had climbed so high, forgetting those of his blood left behind in the shade, and in the end had hit

upon a course which left her angry sense of just resentment uncompromised. If he was an uncle he was also an ecclesiastic—a Prince of the Church; she would sink the relationship in the office.

“Yes, thank you, Father,” she answered, straightening herself.

“Uncle, not Father; Father is for strangers,” said Pandone benevolently.

“I speak as I have been taught to think,” she replied.

“Ah, my child, I fear your poor mother——”

“It was you who taught me,” she interrupted, but with no break in the respectful level of her voice, “my mother never spoke of you.”

His Eminence nodded gravely; his manner was at once reminiscent and regretful. “It was our misfortune that we never met. Emilia, my dove, and you, ’Sandro, your cousin and I will ripen acquaintance more rapidly just we two alone. Do you dine at the palace, my son?”

“Yes, uncle.” Since her entrance Alessandro’s eyes had never quitted Bianca and now his reply was prompt. With it a plan of three days’ standing, made with Rinaldi and two more of his boon companions, went by the board shamelessly. Emilia’s red swan was white after all!

“That is well. And to-morrow you can squire your cousin and Emilia to view the procession—with guards, of course?”

“And Rivara to take care of Emilia—yes, uncle.” He turned to Bianca, the light of a rising excitement in his eyes. “We’ll go to——but never mind where we’ll go. You need not be afraid to trust yourself with me, cousin.”

Bianca laughed. The breaking up of her sombre gravity was the one touch needed to emphasise her beauty, and at sight of the sudden revelation of charm the Cardinal was moved to self-gratulation. Rivara had said she had looks; the under-statement was ridiculous. She had far more than

looks; she had a presence, a ripened beauty unspoiled by self-consciousness. The only doubt now was, had she sense—sense of the right kind? Quite eagerly he waited her reply.

“I am not easily afraid, cousin Alessandro—and there are always the guards! We lost them at Saint Peter’s yesterday, and I was not afraid. If we lose them to-morrow I promise not to faint.”

“Lost them yesterday?” repeated Pandone, his comely face hardening, though the spirit of the answer had entirely pleased him, it promised sense. “Rivara did not tell me—Emilia, you might have been in danger—it was shameful——”

But Emilia only laughed, a franker, fuller, more joyous laugh than her cousin’s. “There was no danger, uncle. I believe cousin Bianca is a witch and stamped on the pavement or said an incantation, for a paladin suddenly appeared—Oh! it must be good to be so strong! His name is Alvano, he is a cousin of Bianca’s and is lodging at the Albergo del Sole near the flower market. Uncle, you must thank——”

“That will do, chatterer. Later you can tell me all about it, but now take ’Sandro off with you while Bianca and I learn to know each other. Go, my child, go, go,” and there was that in his voice which, privileged though they were, the brother and sister understood and never fought against.

Left alone with Bianca the Cardinal motioned her to a stool near by his chair. How to break the ice troubled him. The high spirit of the girl was evident, that much her reply to ’Sandro had made clear; but there was also a personal antagonism, no less strong for being veiled under what he well knew was nothing more than conventional respect. Such high mettle was very desirable—necessary, almost for his purpose, but the defect of its quality, a prone-

ness to offence was a danger. An effusive or affectionate welcome was, he judged, a mistake to be avoided; the unreality would be detected at once, and a bitter retort might strain tension to breaking point. To ignore the past, so far as possible, was wisest, and there, he thought, her pride would stand his friend. Finally he reverted to Emilia's jesting reference to the loss of the guards in the *atrium*.

"This Signor Alvano, your cousin, was a stranger to you, I suppose?"

"Until yesterday I never heard of his existence; he was as unknown to me, even by name, as Emilia and Alessandro were a week ago."

The opening was unpromising, but Pandone made the best of it. "And yet I think already you love Emilia a little? That you have won her warm heart there is no doubt."

Bianca assented, but without enthusiasm. His Eminence she knew, had not brought her to Rome in such urgent haste for Emilia's sake, since Emilia, until the previous week, had been ignorant of her coming. "I am sure her heart is warm. This," and she touched the purple taffeta, "is her gift."

"And better will follow," blundered Pandone, smiling. "I daresay in Malazzorbo you do not find——"

"I prefer my own home-spun," she broke in, without heat as she had been without enthusiasm. "But I gathered from Emilia that it would shame your Eminence before your friends."

"There you misunderstood," he protested. "But let the child have her way. It will be her pleasure—and mine."

For a moment the girl sat silent, frowning in thought, her warm-brown eyes gravely on his; then her reply astonished him: "I do not like debts, but when I do not know

what payment is expected I am afraid of them. Why am I in Rome, Father?"

But again he was wise enough to avoid protests or pretences.

"Leave that until after the procession to-morrow," he temporised. And yet it was not altogether an evasion. The spectacle should serve a double purpose—it should show something of the supreme greatness possible to a Pandone, a greatness whose consummation she might aid, and also so stir her girl's heart with the splendour and glitter of Rome that she would assent a willing "yes" to his scheme, rather than return to Malazzorbo—where there were no purple taffetas! "Tell me something, rather, of this paladin cousin you conjured out of the stones of the *atrium*."

"That was Emilia's name for him, not mine." If her uncle was content to leave her challenge unanswered she saw no need to press it home. At least he knew she was under no illusions, and for the present that was enough. "The cousinship is remote. I think he told me that his grandmother and mine were sisters. Emilia said you would thank him for his aid. Perhaps it is unnecessary—Signor Rivara knows."

"Alvano? There are Alvanos in the south."

"He is from the south," said Bianca, carefully indifferent.

"I have heard of an Alvano in the employ of the Emperor—in his confidence even?"

There was an interrogation in the remembrance, and Bianca answered it. "He made no mention of the Emperor, but when a slum ruffian—how foul-mouthed these Romans are!—compared the Emperor to a Montelengo, I thought he would have killed the fellow for the insult."

"Ah!" said His Eminence contemptuously, "foul-mouthed, indeed, and always reckless to asperse the Church."

“But Signor Alvano’s anger was for the Emperor. The fellow said that this Montelengo always travelled with his cageful——”

“My child! My child!” cried Montelengo’s colleague, “you must not say such things. And which of us is above calumny? As for that latter-day Herod, that troubler of the Church and heretic harbourer of Saracens, the Emperor, it is flagrantly notorious that he——” Suddenly he paused, stumbling over his words like a man who finds an unexpected pitfall opening before him in the argument. So frank an avowal of common knowledge was not likely to advance his purpose in bringing the girl to Rome. “But men talk at random,” he went on with a deprecatory wave of his white hand, his magnificent voice rolling its periods splendidly. “Well said the great apostle, speak no evil of dignities; and yet in these modern days of irreligion and disrespect for the great, the higher the place the fouler the vilification. The Emperor? Why, at this very moment His Highness is vowed to a crusade for the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre. By his oath, freely given before the altar at San Germano two years ago in the presence of His Holiness, who was then the Cardinal Bishop of Ostia, he swore to sail for Palestine this coming August, under penalty of excommunication if he broke the vow. As a Christian king, a zealous son of the Church and an honourable gentleman, noble in spirit, chivalrous, brave to rashness, no doubt he will keep his oath; and yet, sworn Crusader though he is, not even he is free from calumny. Oh! these foul-mouthed Romans! My child, there is great truth in the proverb ‘If evil tongues burned like fire, the poor would have charcoal for nothing.’”

He paused, breathing a little heavily after the sustained exertion, but not ill-content. His facts were true, which is always comforting to a historian, and his deductions did himself and their subjects credit. Also he had paved

a way to that answer to her question which the girl was to receive after she had been glamoured by the pageant of the Papal procession. He hoped she had failed to notice the abrupt transition from censure to eulogium, and it was with distinct annoyance that he heard her hark back to the original cause of difference. The girl was uncomfortably thorough, uncomfortably tenacious.

“Then, the Emperor being such a Christian gentleman, Signor Alvano was right to resent the odious comparison?”

Promptly Pandone rose to his feet. “Leave such things aside, leave them utterly aside—they are unseemly. Find Emilia; yes, and Alessandro. I shall enquire from Rivara, and see that this Signor Alvano is properly thanked for his assistance. As to the malice of these street brawlers—forget it, my child, forget it. It is the nature of mud to spatter upwards; no man can walk a public path and keep his feet clean.”

It was a sharp criticism of his day and generation but, for a generality, it struck not far from the truth.

CHAPTER IX

BROKEN BREAD UPON THE WATERS

FROM the gateway of the Palazzo Pandone, Alvano, having been thanked frankly by Rivara, prettily by Emilia, and not at all by Bianca, with a promise of further thanks by His Eminence himself, took his way eastward in the direction of the southern slopes of the Quirinal. He walked slowly, like a man deeply preoccupied, avoiding the jostling of the ever-shifting crowd in the thronged streets more by instinct than observation.

The imminent death of Honorius, long threatened and long delayed, with the consequent seating in Saint Peter's chair of a new occupant, had drawn him to Rome in his master's service. If to peace-loving Honorius there succeeded another Pope equally mild in spirit, tolerant, and unambitious for the secular advancement of the Church, all would be well, but if not, then Frederick of Hohenstaufen, Emperor of the Romans, King of Sicily and Apulia, King of Jerusalem, Duke of Suabia, Lord of Lombardy, and much more, must look to himself.

Leaving on his right the rubbish heap that lumbered, and had lumbered for ages, Trajan's Forum, a lurking place for pariah dogs, and the many petty thieves of the quarter, Alvano turned into a quiet street whose time-worn houses appeared to date back to the later Empire, so ancient were they, so stoutly, darkly built, and so defaced with scars of warfare. There were, perhaps, twenty such dwellings in this Roman backwater of present quiet. Except for fire and sack most were as the builders' hands had left them, many long-dead generations past, but upon

the ancient stock of some few the style and life of a new age had been grafted.

It was one of these latter that Alvano entered. Its punning device and motto, a loaf of bread broken into four pieces with *Frangi pane* underneath, were known through the length and breadth of the seven hills. They dated from a time of famine in the city, when the head of the great house had literally broken his bread with the starving.

"The Signor Frangipani?" demanded Alvano, and thought it no slight when, having given his name, he was bidden to wait in the anteroom to the guard house.

But the delay was short, and the respect with which he was conducted up the marble staircase proved the high estimation in which he or his master was held.

On every side were quiet evidences of the wealth and refined taste to be expected in such a household, rooted through centuries in the soil of Rome's greatness, and growing in power with the growth of the city. Trophies from the East, infidel arms and armour worn in every crusade since Peter the Hermit preached his Holy War, spoils from Egypt, riflings of Etruscan tombs, relics of old Rome, Saracen work from Spain, statuary, carvings, frescoes, mosaics, tapestries, all co-ordinated into a charm which was the gift of many generations.

Alvano was received in what a later age would have called the cabinet of the Casa Frangipani, a room plain to severity, where the master transacted the business incidental to his estates, which largely consisted of property within the city. Otto Frangipani, grey haired, grey bearded, lean faced, dressed with a severe plainness that matched his workroom and accorded with his more than sixty years, greeted his visitor cordially, but delayed no further than the closing of the door, and the settling of the hangings back into their place, to shoot his question.

"Ugolino Conti! What will His Highness say?"

"Nothing, unless the Pope speaks," answered Alvano, taking the seat Frangipani indicated near his own.

"And that will not be long delayed, unless Gregory IX. differs greatly from the Cardinal Bishop of Ostia! Nor will he. The fire of one will be the flame of the other. But that is not what I mean, and why should we fence? What will the Emperor think of the election?"

"That he would have preferred Pandone."

"Pandone!" Frangipani shrugged his shoulders. "Is it your master's policy to degrade the Papacy?"

"It is my master's earnest wish to see Italy united under one strong head——"

"Himself?"

"Where is there a better?"

"Go on; but the millennium is either past or to come."

"To come, and we shall strive for it."

"We?" repeated Frangipani, jestingly, though there was no jest in his grave eyes.

"Why not? Was there not once a mouse as well as a lion?"

"Yes—in fable."

"Then I have faith in fables. Besides, what are fables but mirrors of life? Signor Frangipani, as you have said, why should we fence? Confess, now. Is it not a splendid dream this of the Emperor's! A strong, clean Church, living for its great Head alone, and with no thought of the world except the world's salvation; a strong, clean State to safeguard the Church and leave her free to work out——"

"Yes," interrupted Frangipani, drily, "splendid—but a dream! Will Conti abate one jot of his temporal power! No! By every saint in the calendar, no! Rather, he will pile claim on claim till the whole world is shadowed; we in Rome know Conti."

The fire of enthusiasm flickered out of Alvano's eyes

and he sat back in his chair. "Then so much the worse for the world, and yet more the worse for Italy. But think of it for a moment—a united Italy, no longer an Italy north against south, east against west; no longer Lombardy at the throat of Sicily, Venice trampling upon Genoa, Florence threatening Pisa, but Italy four-square against the world. And the one figure that stands between the dream and the reality is—the Pope!" Suddenly he leaned forward again: "Signor Frangipani, your own question, what do you think of the election?"

"That the Pope is more than eighty years old."

"Yes, we have thought of that, too."

"We?" repeated Frangipani, but this time with interrogation rather than jest in his tone. It was not the first time they had talked together, and he was sure Alvano was not in Rome simply to learn who should succeed Honorius, nor even to gauge the temper of the city towards that successor, though that, no doubt, was part of his purpose. Something deeper lay behind, and in the event of that something deeper touching his House it behoved him to know with whom he had to deal. Alvano's answer, delivered after a pause and with thoughtful deliberation, startled him.

"It is my present intention to take Orders."

"You, a priest?"

"Why not?"

"A soldier?"

"Again, why not? Colonna and Regnier, Cardinals both, are as good soldiers as they are churchmen." Which was true, and no censure in an age when to lay aside the crozier for the sword was the commonplace of custom. Alvano might have gone further and said they were better soldiers than they were priests.

"The question is not why not, but why?"

Again Alvano paused and again his reply was deliberate.

"Because, as you have said, Gregory is more than eighty years old."

Frangipani made no immediate reply but, leaning aside, spread out his hands to the open pan of white wood-ash which—March can be cold in Rome—stood upon a tripod at his knee. When he spoke it was without turning his head.

"I take your meaning. Without doubt you would climb high in the Church, but not to Saint Peter's chair. That will never succeed—never! An Imperialist Pope is—unthinkable. It is another of your Emperor's dreams."

"The greatest thing in the world," said Alvano, "the greatest—the greatest," but whether he spoke of the Papacy or the Emperor's dream, was uncertain. Abruptly Frangipani shifted round in his chair.

"Are you in Rome only to dream dreams, Signor Alvano?"

The swiftness of the attack staggered Alvano for a moment, but for a moment only, then he laughed. "We are not altogether visionary at Palermo, or at Capua, where my master is at present. I am in Rome upon a simple question of £. s. d.—*libræ, solidi, denarii*! And since we of the Empire are not hagglers I come to the point at once. The Emperor's heart is set on buying the Casa Frangipani."

For a moment Frangipani stared incredulous, then a red wave of passion swept the greyness from his lean face.

"The Casa Frangipani is not for sale, not even to the Emperor!" His voice rose sharply, hotly. "I thought better things of His Highness than to insult loyalty and friendship with such an offer! Would the Emperor sell his castle of Hohenstaufen that cradled his race? We are only simple gentlefolk, we Frangipani, but the house where our fathers lived and died——"

"Signor! Signor! Signor!" Alvano laid a hand in

protesting pressure on the elder man's knee. "You must come to Palermo, or to Capua, and learn to know the Emperor better than you do. You thought yourself insulted, but it is you who insult us—the Emperor and Luca Alvano. Dispossess Frangipani? Not while there is a Rome and a Frangipani! And so long as the one lasts so long will there be the other. Where would Rome be without its *frangi pane*?"

"I do not understand your riddles," said Frangipani, but no longer with passion in his voice. Alvano's subtle flattery had cast it out.

"That is because there is no riddle. At present, in common with most of the great Roman families, you hold all you possess within the city as a fief from the Pope?"

"In name—yes."

"In name—that I can well believe. A Frangipani in fief to, say, a Pandone except in name would be—what was your word? Unthinkable? But with Ugolino Conti will it remain a name only, or unthinkable? You know that hard old man and what a spirit he is of—stern, implacable, insatiable. Not for himself, in Capua we do not misjudge him; his greed will not be for himself but for the Church, his intolerable pretensions not to exalt Ugolino Conti, the man, but Gregory, Christ's Vicar and Vicegerent upon earth. But the result will be the same. The dust will be blown from his path, the small ground to powder, the great broken to pieces, unless the Emperor says 'Your kingdom is not of this world!' And who else dares say it but the Emperor? Signor Frangipani, I mean no disparagement, but the fiefs of Rome will be pebbles for the grinding. Ask yourself if it is not so, I will accept your answer without cavil."

But Frangipani gave no such answer, at least not directly, nor did Alvano expect the pride of the race which had resented the supposed rough touch of an Emperor to

confess despair before the shadow of even such an aggression as he had pictured.

"Leaving all that aside," he replied, "what has your master to say to me?"

"This—sell me what you possess in Rome, and I shall put it back into your hands again to hold from me. Is it not better to hold from Hohenstaufen than from a possible Pandone? But perhaps you will reply—" Alvano's voice deepened as he dwelt on his words with slow deliberation—"Perhaps you will object, how can I sell at all without the permission of my overlord? I answer——"

"When the question is asked you can answer it, Signor Alvano. Frangipani does as he wills with his own. The question rather is *Cui bono?* Of what advantage is it?"

But Luca Alvano had not travelled from Capua without an answer to such an obvious question, and when, an hour later, he returned to the Albergo del Sole, he was well enough content. Gregory's joy bells were pealing overhead from every Church tower, but to Alvano's instructed ear there was already a discord in the harmony. His master had set a foot in Rome; what Frederick claimed Frederick would hold against the Pope himself, even though that Pope were Ugolino Conti!

CHAPTER X

AT A ROMAN INN

ALL the next day Alvano was busied in the delicate and dexterous advancement of his master's service. With its details and its success this story has nothing to do, but so much has been told that his place in the Emperor's confidence and their common plans for Italy may be clear.

He was resting in his room at the close of the day, his mind full of many speculations, when an unwonted commotion in the inn below stairs roused him by making concentrated thought impossible. Uncertainly he had been conscious of an added uproar in the street but had given it no heed, the nearness of the flower market accounted for sudden brawls. Then the confusion had quieted until it broke out afresh below, followed by a tramp of feet on the stairs, and the landlord's voice, raised in pride.

"Such an honour, your Holiness—your Eminence, I mean. Keep back there, good people, keep back; do not press so closely upon His Eminence, you incommode him." Very carefully he spoke in such a voice that none of the glory shed upon his house should be lost for the want of telling. Cardinals were not uncommon in Rome, but they were far from common in the inns of Rome.

"Signor Alvano is lodged in the Saint Zosimo chamber, but had we known he was a friend of your Eminence we would have given him the Apollo——"

"What!" broke in Pandone; he was occasionally blessed with a sense of humor, but only when he was quite certain of his dignity, "does a Pagan god rank higher than Saint Zosimo, a Pope and Father of the Church?"

"Ah no, your Holiness, that would be impossible, but—" the landlord paused, stricken at once by an idea and shortness of breath. Here was an opening for an advertisement which would hand down the glory of this day's greatness to unborn generations. "Your Eminence," he said, timidly, "if I might be permitted to call the Apollo room by the name of Pandone as a commemoration, a thank offering, as it were, for the honour——"

"Um," said Pandone, "that is as you please. But I am pressed for time. Where is this Saint Zosimo chamber?"

"Your Eminence, I am your grateful servant for life. The Pandone room! That shall be a room to remember! Travellers shall tell of it from Sicily to Milan! Saint Zosimo? Just a step, your Eminence, just a step."

It was no fault of Pandone's that the landlord's zeal flung open the door without the preliminary courtesy of a knock; but, warned through the chinks of the ill-fitting frame of the honour in store for him, Alvano was on his feet ready to receive his visitor. For an instant the eyes of the two men met, then, as the Cardinal's glance swept comprehensively round Saint Zosimo, noting its almost sordid discomfort, Alvano fell mightily in his estimation.

Like Frangipani he guessed that the Emperor's confidant was not in Rome solely to hear the result of the Conclave, and an undefined expectation of reaping some possible advantage to himself had prompted his visit rather than any gratitude for the help given in the *atrium*. But surely, he thought, with a sudden sense of chilling disappointment, Alvano's influence at Palermo must be exaggerated—no confidant of the Emperor could be so vilely housed! Then, almost in the same instant, came a second thought, and Alvano leaped into yet higher reputation—the greater and more secret the mission the less he would advertise his presence in Rome, and so his content with the humble inferiority of Saint Zosimo was explained.

"Signor Alvano? And from the south, I think?" he said briskly. "Good! Then I have been directed aright. You can leave us, friend," and he nodded to the host. Nor did he speak again until the door was closed, shutting in His Eminence and Father Pieretti, His Eminence's private chaplain and secretary in ecclesiastical affairs, a little round-faced, apple-cheeked cleric who was his patron's shadow; some said his patron's brains. But that was a libel. "Signor Alvano, I have come to pay a debt of thanks."

"The debt is mine, your Eminence," answered Alvano. "To aid two charming ladies, gain the happiness of your Eminence's acquaintance, and find an unexpected cousin—why, it's a triple debt! But your Eminence must be fatigued," and seizing his one chair, an angular rush-bottomed assurance of discomfort, Alvano pushed it gravely forward. "It is the sole throne allowed the poor saint; but perhaps he was an ascetic and despised luxuries," he added, his eyes twinkling.

"Um, you would have done better in the Apollo chamber," said the Cardinal, seating himself nevertheless. It marked their relative dignities. "But youth can ignore hardship, and no doubt you are busied abroad in the city. His Highness will be overjoyed at the choice of the Conclave?"

"Without doubt, equally with your Eminence," answered Alvano gravely. "His Holiness' wisdom is certainly ripened by age."

"Yes," pursued Pandone, ignoring the double inuendo, "it must be a great satisfaction to the Emperor that the hand from which he took the cross before the altar at San Germano is now ready to bless the crusade?"

This time it was Alvano who let the suggestiveness pass without a reply. "My master will always humbly desire the Pope's blessing." He spoke deliberately, looking down

unsmiling into Pandone's smiling eyes. But behind the smile there was set the watchfulness of the duelist who feels the touch of his adversary's steel upon his own, and is alert for thrust or parry.

"Do you accompany His Highness to Palestine?"

"I am in all things at His Highness' orders."

"Ah!" said Pandone in his rich, sonorous voice, "to serve is the privilege of life. I have heard His Holiness say that his chief desire is to be the Servant of servants. And the expedition, no doubt, is well forward?"

"Does your Eminence speak as a soldier?"

Pandone fluttered a white hand in the air. "Signor Alvano, I am for peace, always for peace; never forget that, I beg. I speak as man to man."

"Then as man to man—if the freedom may be forgiven me—I can say with confidence that the expedition is as far forward as the Emperor desires."

The smile dulled in Pandone's eyes and there was a silence. Would the crusade sail?—that was the question which troubled the Church and which he hoped to solve in the Zosimo chamber. Alvano's evasions said, no! And yet he had uttered no phrase inconsistent with the Emperor's good faith. Should he probe the doubt further? If he probed and failed would he not injure, perhaps destroy, Bianca's usefulness—always supposing Bianca had the sense of her good looks?

And so for half a minute there was a pause. That grey old wolf, Gregory, has sent him as a spy, said Alvano in his thoughts. But Alvano was wrong. The Cardinal fought for his own hand. Any chestnuts raked from the fire of controversy between the Church and the Empire, would be for his own consumption. Hyperbole aside, Giordano Pandone had his thoughts set on personal credit gained before the next Conclave.

And while both pondered, Father Pieretti broke the silence.

“His Holiness has this deeply at heart, your Eminence. What if you were to bring Signor Alvano to the Vatican? Supposing there are really preparations——”

Round swung Alvano. At all costs that must be prevented. He might fence Pandone, but to face the inquisition of Gregory’s keener brain, backed by his tremendous authority and indomitable, autocratic will, would be fatal.

“Supposing! Supposing! Supposing!” he repeated angrily, almost truculently. “What, Father? Do you dare to hint aspersion on my master?”

But Pandone intervened. For reasons of his own any present appeal to Gregory would be as distasteful to him as to Alvano. “Peace, Pieretti, peace. His Holiness would give us small thanks for adding to his already heavy burdens at such a time as this.”

But as a soldier Alvano, who thus far had been on his defence, knew the value of a sortie. It may not discomfit the enemy, but at least it proves the spirit of the garrison.

“Your Eminence,” he protested indignantly, “there was a slur upon my master, and from the Church. Can it be that the Church doubts——”

“Chut, chut,” interrupted Pandone, with the deprecatory wave of his hand which rarely failed to soothe. “The Church! Must it rain because a frog croaks? Besides, I am not here to talk of such things; I am here solely to thank with all my heart a most gallant gentleman——”

Alvano interrupted him with a gesture. “Your Eminence, I am already over thanked.”

Once more all smiles the Cardinal ran his hand down the length of his silken beard: “Signor Alvano, to please others you have once found your way to the Palazza Pan-

done, find it a second time to please—these others again! Over thanked! When I was young there was no such word! Your cousin and her cousin have warm memories; may I tell them you will come?” And what could Alvano do but bow his acknowledgment of such gracious courtesy from a Prince of the Church, even while he said in his heart that the Palazza Pandone would never again be darkened by him. His Eminence might be there, and His Eminence was too much a living interrogation.

But when His Eminence’s litter, with its guards before and behind, had departed from the heart of the gaping crowd, leaving Alvano, the host and half the household bareheaded at the inn door, the apple-cheeked chaplain returned to his point.

“Father, His Holiness and the Church would have thanked you for news through that Signor Alvano—and another election may not be far off.”

“Be easy,” answered Pandone. “When I have brought His Holiness that which I shall bring him, he and the Church will do more than thank me. And to you I say, Forget, and you shall not be forgotten. This Alvano would only have told us half-truths at the best, and we must have full assurance.” The Cardinal’s mind was made up. His forethought in bringing Bianca to Rome had been wise; if the girl lacked sense, she must be taught sense.

CHAPTER XI

THE PROCESSION OF POPE GREGORY IX

THE day following was the day of the great procession when all Rome would line the streets from Saint Peter's to the Lateran, or bear a part in the glittering spectacle itself. On such a day Alvano knew even the Emperor's service must stand aside; for policy's sake the chiefs of the greater houses must show themselves in public, honouring the Church through her newly-elected head. It was the first time he had been in Rome for such a pageant, but apart from curiosity a higher interest drew him to the streets—that he might judge something of the temper of the people.

Starting from before Saint Peter's five-fold doors, the procession would, he knew, cross the bridge which spanned the Tiber almost under the frown of the Castel Sant' Angelo, by the Via Parione it would make its way by a devious route through the quarter of that name, one of the oldest in Rome, halting by the tower of Stephani Petri, hard by the Flower Market, that the Jews from the Ghetto, on the bank of the river, might make their submission according to established custom. In Rome, as elsewhere, suffrance was the badge of all their tribe. From the ancient tower the pageant would sweep to the eastward past Constantine's Church of San Marco, and on by Trajan's Column and Sant' Adriano to the Forum, a rubbish heap of shattered masonry and tumbled columns half buried, and wholly overgrown by the weeds of generations. This it would enter through the Arch of Septimus Severus, traversing the uneven ground as best it could to the Arch of Titus, and so by the Colosseum and San Clemente to the Lateran.

Leaving the inn, Alvano pushed his way through the crowd in the direction of the tower of Stephani Petri. There, he judged, he would see the underworld of Rome at its best and worst. It was one of the five selected places on the route—the other four were: before Saint Peter's, at the Cencius Palace, and in front of San Marco and Sant' Adriano—where, again according to established custom, the newly-elected Pope showered largesse, and Alvano knew no surer test of a mob's temper than the reception of its master's bounty.

The good humor which had served him in the *atrium* two days before again stood him in stead, but so dense was the throng that the hour for the arrival of the head of the procession had almost sounded by the time he had won a road to the open space fronting the tower. Its square, solid bulk has long since disappeared; the Palazza Pio now stands upon the ancient site. Once placed, Alvano looked about him with a healthy curiosity.

The approaches and the space itself were kept clear from intrusion by the Papal guard, and Alvano's glance fell on the deputation of Jews grouped in a little knot in the enclosure. There were, he counted, twelve in all, and wondered if they represented the number of the ancient tribes. Without a doubt they had been well chosen by their fellows; Judaism never permits itself to disgrace itself in the public eye. Their gaberdines might be of common stuff, but the men were not of common fibre. Erect, grey-bearded, dignified, there was not a man of them but in inches and intellect looked down upon the jeering rabble they ignored. In a sense they were the wealth of Rome, in a commercial sense the stability of Rome, but the rabble, who had no stability and hated wealth with the bitter gall of envy, jeered them as dogs. At their head was the Chief Rabbi, the Roll of the Pentateuch on his shoulders.

"The law in your face and the profits in his pocket! That's a true Jew!" cried one of the crowd, and all roared at the jest. "The law and the profits," they shouted. "The law for us and the profits for the Jew," and one struck up:

Ever since the world began
Reuben, Issachar and Dan
Picked the pocket of every man.

Hou! hou! hou!

"*Hou! hou! hou!*" howled the mob in chorus, "*Hou! hou! hou!*" But the Jews, impassive, silent, motionless as statues hewn out of grey travertine, gave no sign that they heard. Without doubt they did not forget.

"See Israel, the goldsmith, third from the last," cried another. "Hola! Israel! Has Bobone tired of your little Rachel yet?" and again they chorused, "*Hou! hou! hou!*" Then they rocked with laughter as a ragged urchin, breaking cover, tweaked the skirt of the Rabbi's gaberdine, but laughed yet louder when a smart stroke from a guard's halberd sent the boy sprawling; it was all sport and meat to the mob.

From the grey, patient group in the open space Alvano's alert gaze wandered over the shifting crowd. It was the scum of Rome leavened by a sprinkling of the curious such as himself, and a proportion of artisans drawn there, like the scum, by the promised donation. A splash of purple in the sunlight on a balcony on his own side of the street caught his observation. Leaning forward across the rail and keenly interested was Bianca Pandone; it was easy to guess that the lad who shared the balcony with her was Alessandro.

Remembering the adventure of the *atrium*, Alvano searched the crowd before the house, but no guard in the Cardinal's livery could be seen. The explanation was simple. Sure of Rivara's disapproval young Pandone

had evaded the escort in the crowd and brought his cousin to this vantage point, reserved long before to be shared with someone probably very different.

And Alvano, as he understood, grew even more hotly angry than Rivara would have done—the house was the shop of Susanna Ligorio, the perfume seller, at times a vendor of love philtres and such-like potions, but at times suspected of a worse traffic.

To do Pandone justice, the choice of the place had been nothing worse than a boyish thoughtlessness, blent with the desire to prove himself already a man of the world well versed in the ways of Young Rome. To that was added the purpose of securing entirely to himself for an assured hour this beautiful cousin who had so suddenly fallen from nowhere. Half Rome would pass that way, and all who saw would envy him. But Alvano, stranger in the city though he was, knew enough of the reputation and associations of the perfumer to be afraid, and resolutely forced his way through the crowd until he reached the closed door. It was just then that, heralded by a rousing roar up the street, the head of the procession came in sight and Rome, clean and unclean, was spectacle-bound for an hour.

Behind a led horse, housed in the Papal trappings of red and gold, rode the *crucifer*, bearing his huge silver cross, polished and glittering, reared high for all to see. Next followed, also on horseback, the standard-bearers of the twelve wards into which the city was divided, their crimson pennons gay in the breeze; then came the golden cherubim, borne upon lances, the prefects of the navy in the furred garments of their office, the judges clad in their black robes, each with two servitors, one on either side, a hand upon the horse's bridle; next, a band of choristers, in white surplices crossed by crimson scarves; then priests and dignitaries of the Church in a rising scale

from the humble sub-deacon, tramping afoot in his cassock of coarse black stuff, to My Lord Cardinal upon his led palfrey and gorgeous in crimson, purple, white and gold.

Following the princes of the Church came the Church's Head riding upon a white mule, his attire a miracle of splendour, and attended upon either side by the flower of Rome's nobility. Immediately behind Gregory rode the Gonfalonier of the Church, bearing the Papal standard; Benincasa, the Senator followed, surrounded by his officers; next came the Prefect of the City, then the nobles, the knights, the city guilds, each and all with the fluttering of banners, the play of colour, the glittering of mail, the following of squires and guards that marked their degree and station. And always, from first to last, there was the music of a solemn chant in the air, now from the choristers, now from the long line of priests, now from the guilds who looked up to the Pope for patronage in their craftsmanship.

So extended was the line of varying splendour, a line sparkling with jewels, crusted with gold and silver, brilliant with every hue of the rainbow and scintillating in a broken stream of starry fire from polished armour, inlaid and damascened, that it occupied a long hour in passing a given spot. And every minute of that hour had its shift of mood for the packed mob, as those Rome loved or hated, feared, trusted or despised, rode past at a foot's pace.

In these shifts of mood, with their shouted applause or howled derision, Alvano saw the drift of the straws which showed how the winds blew in Rome. Nor was he dissatisfied. It was surely significant and full of comfort for the Empire that, even on a day when the glamour of the Church was in the ascendant, when the senses of spectacle-loving Rome were tickled by splendour displayed in that Church's honour, and the goodwill of the groundlings bribed by a Pope's largesse, Frangipani, the

Imperialist, should be greeted with acclamations, while Castiglione, the fanatic clerical partisan, whose brother had been Gregory's uncompromising supporter in the Conclave, was cursed to his face or received in stony silence.

Colonna, Regnier, Capuccio, Cardinals all, were cheered, but Alvano judged from the freely-spoken opinions upon every side that it was the soldier the mob applauded, not the churchman. For Pandone there was a mixed reception, but always the goodwill bore down the ill as the women found their voices. Given a Conclave of women cardinals, thought Alvano, Pandone would certainly be elected Pope by a unanimous vote! Montelengo they openly jeered.

Everywhere Gregory himself was received with enthusiasm. Had it been possible the crowd, scum and all, would have gone on its knees as he passed, but the congestion of the packed space forbade. Failing that reverence, every head was bared and bent for his blessing, Alvano's with the rest; was he not Christ's vicar upon earth, the direct successor of him to whom was given the power to shut or to open, to loose or to bind? By his own will he could bring peace upon earth, or a sword; where was there a greater greatness?

In the half minute of Gregory's approach Alvano, before bowing his head with the rest, studied him anxiously. Eighty years and more, men said. But there was no sign of the weakness of age in the erect carriage of the square shoulders, the high-poised head, the quick, firm gestures of the hand as he blessed the bowed people to right and left; rather, there was the suggested strength, the quick assurance of a man's prime. His eyes were keen and alert, full of vitality and the power of intellect, the nose large and dominant, the mouth stern and purposeful, the chin prominent to obstinacy. Only the sunken cheeks, the hollows at the temples, a leanness of the neck, hinted the waste of years. It was as if the flesh had aged, while the

spirit held tenaciously to the indomitable vigour of its unbroken manhood. A strong face, a stern face; the face of a man with the pride of youth and the obstinacy of old age, of a man powerfully self-reliant, a man whose will would neither hesitate nor turn back—then the white hand went up in benediction and Alvano bowed his head.

Next moment, at the blare of a trumpet, the procession halted, and the silence grew intense as the Chief Rabbi advanced to Gregory's knee and raised towards him the Roll of the Law, at the same time, and in a set form of words which he might not vary, praying for the Pope's protection. Behind him stood the eleven, their heads bent humbly, their hands crossed upon their breasts. It was an ancient form, this submission of the Ghetto to the Church, but Gregory was not slow to give the form a vital significance. Touching the roll with his palm, he motioned it away.

"Yes, yes, Rabbi Ezra ben Hosea, we also love and reverence your ancient books, but though the law came by Moses, grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. As for you," he reared himself more upright in the saddle, and from the bowed heads of the Jews his keen gaze swept the hushed crowd, "to you, yes, and to all men, we say, obedience brings peace; live quietly and ye shall be left in quiet; meddle with nothing that doth not concern you and ye shall not be meddled with. Ride on!" and the procession moved forward.

But Alvano had received his message as definitely as if, out of all the listening multitude, the Pope had spoken into his ear alone. Honorius, recognising that duty speaks with many voices, had twice given the Emperor respite from his oath; Gregory recognised but one duty—obey! And to him the sole obedience which counted for righteousness was obedience to the Church.

"Obedience brings peace."

Alvano neither saw the glitter of mail nor heard the

clank of steel as the long line of knights rode by with jingle of sword-sheath and clank of armour, as if to lend force and significance to the threat. For threat it was. If obedience meant peace, then to disobey, to venture a no to the Church's yes, was war. Nor, in any case, would the knights with their glitter of mail and clang of steel have given him a troubled thought. The Church, no doubt, would fight with these, but her most deadly weapons were to be found in no soldier's armoury, and the Emperor had himself put one into her hand the day he invoked excommunication if he hung back from the Crusade.

Excommunication, with interdict to follow! If these were launched what hope could there be for a united Italy to stand four-square to her enemies? For that there must be peace, and only obedience could bring peace. But obedience was the Crusade, the sailing in August, the long months in Palestine away from the growing development of Sicily, away from Italy where the strong hand and clear brain were urgently needed. Obedience brings peace? Vaguely Alvano understood the nobles were passing in defile, Frangipani to be cheered, Castiglione hissed; afterwards he remembered these things, but at the moment not even these were clear. Obedience brings peace! Yes, peace from the Church, but war in Italy, the ruin of Sicily and the breaking up of a life's ideal.

A wild surge of the packed mob brought Alvano, or his thoughts, hastily back from Capua to Rome. The city guilds had passed, to be followed by Gregory's chamberlains scattering silver in double fistfuls through the open space, and the scramble for the spoil had roused Alvano.

"The gift of the Holy Father, out of his great love for the people of Rome," they cried, flinging the coins to right and left. "All that he hath he shareth with his people."

The scene that followed beggared description. If the object of the largesse distributed in these open spaces was,

in part, to draw off congestion from the narrower streets it, perhaps, succeeded, but at a terrible risk. As starved rats fight for their food so Rome fought, scum and artisan together, in an irresponsible Maelstrom that obeyed no impulse but the blind passion of greed. Women were flung aside, weakness trampled, whoso went down in the rush stayed down and in an instant, almost, the air was filled with screams and shrieks, curses and the wailing of children, as the thin crust of civilisation crumbled and out of the ruins the primitive human beast burst forth, naked and unashamed. But in three minutes the storm had passed leaving behind it as echo groans, panting breath, jeers, exclamations and hysterical crying.

That was the moment chosen by Alessandro Pandone to demonstrate still further to Bianca what a consummate man of the world he was, and how patrician in his contempt for the groundlings. Hitherto she had treated him with amused tolerance rather than the admiration he knew was his due. Once and for all he would show her her mistake. Filling the wide-mouthed goblet he had emptied more often than was wise in his assertion of mature manhood, he stood up and leaned over the rail of the balcony.

"Hullo, down there!" he shouted. "You must be hot after your grovelling for coppers, perhaps this will cool you," and with a wide gesture of his arm he sent the wine flying. Alvano, his back against the door of the house, where he had withdrawn from the swirl of the Maelstrom, saw it hang in the air a moment, then split up and fall in a red rain, a rain like the first droppings of a shower of blood, on the passionate faces upturned at the sudden call in the half silence.

The effect was immediate. With a howl of fury madness broke loose afresh in execrations, threats, abuse, till above the din a voice cried out: "Pandone!" then another, a woman's, shrill and clear, "The Vico del Falcone!"

Instantly the general, scattered hate flamed to a focus. "Pandone! Pandone!" rose in a howl, "Pandone who drowned Luigi Luti!" And Alvano, on the upper of the two steps from the street level, had no more than time to draw his sword when the rush started in flood, to ebb back before that thirty inches of steel and the stern face above it.

"Pandone! by some back way, quick!—quick!" he shouted, thinking not of Pandone but of Bianca.

But Pandone only bent lower over the rail. "Bah! Give the dogs a bone! There, dry the spatters with that," and he flung a handful of coins into the sea of upturned faces.

The contempt was too gross even for the scum of Rome to endure. Or it may be those behind saw the promise of a larger loot over the bodies of those in front, for under pressure of the rear the ebb rose afresh in flood.

Now was Alvano in the pinch of a cleft stick. Of himself he gave no thought, but to brawl in Rome, shedding the blood of Rome, even of its scum, was not in his master's interests; it might be remembered against the Empire, yet leave the way open to murder he could not, his master would be the last to ask it of him. His difficulty was impersonal; already he had forgotten that it was this new, far-off cousin who was threatened. In the end, and it was all within ten seconds, he tried a desperate expedient, desperate because of its doubtfulness and because it would leave him a marked man in Rome—if he lived.

"God and the Empire!" he shouted, his blade shifting from end to end of the half circle before him in such a vicious, rapid threat that even the flood recoiled against the hinder pressure. "Pandone! For the signorina's sake, escape by the back while there's time—quick! quick!" Then he caught up afresh his thundered slogan, "God and the Empire! God and the Empire! Who is on my side? Who?"

And the desperate expedient succeeded. Out of the very

midst of the press a burly figure in a butcher's dress thrust itself head and shoulders above the swaying sea, and a roar like the roar of a baited bull answered Alvano.

"God and the Empire!" he bellowed. "I'm Cecco! Give place there, ye dogs; I'm Cecco, and you know me."

Evidently they did, they and all the Parione quarter. So far as was possible they shrank aside as he drove his way towards Alvano, using his brutal strength brutally. Those who barred his path, whether by will or through helplessness, suffered. It seemed the end of the crisis. From a score of places rose an echo to Alvano's call "God and the Empire," whilst overhead there was a scrambling rasp, and simultaneously with Cecco's final thrust through the crowd, Alessandro Pandone dropped alongside Alvano.

"Aye! I am Pandone," he cried. "You know where to find me if you want to—but you won't want!"

That stirred the fire afresh. "Damn Pandone!" cried a voice. "Who drowned Luigi Luti?" cried another, and the last state might have been worse than the first but that the door opened behind the three on the upper step and Bianca appeared. Placing a hand on the shoulder of each of her cousins she leaned forward between them, calm-faced and unafraid.

"I, too, am a Pandone," she said.

There was the briefest of silences, then the fickle temper of the mob changed as a weather-vane veers from north to south in a flawed wind. "Viva la signorina," they cried as heartily as before they had cursed, "Viva! Viva! Pandone! Pandone! Pandone!"

Had the Cardinal heard that shout it would surely have rejoiced him. Is not the voice of the people the voice of God? and is it not the same voice that speaks its whisper in the Conclave? More than ever he would have felt assured he had done well in fetching Bianca from Malaz-zorbo.

CHAPTER XII

ROME OR MALAZZORBO

FOLLOWING the traditional Banquet of Accession, held, as usual, in the dining-hall of the Lateran Palace upon the afternoon of the pageant, Giordano Pandone returned home full of satisfaction in the present, and of hope for the future. Both sprang from the one source—the signal attention and favour shown him by Gregory.

According to custom the Pope had sat at a table apart, in symbol of his splendid and tremendous isolation from the world, but not so far removed as to preclude conversation. To all the dignitaries, both lay and clerical, he addressed himself in turn, but time after time it was the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte whom he singled out from amongst them all. Then, the banquet over, it had been upon Pandone's arm, with Benincasa, the Senator, upon the other side, that the Holy Father, a very weary old man, had walked to his private apartments.

"We must lean on those on whom the Church leans," he had said, loud enough for all to hear and with a friendly significance in his tone which meant more than the mere words.

But perhaps that very extreme weariness, with its clear evidence of the crushing weight of years, had been the day's most satisfactory feature. It had been as remarkable as Gregory's obvious goodwill, so remarkable that Montelengo had later plumed himself to Pandone on the astuteness which had snatched a future victory out of immediate defeat.

"Let him keep the chair warm," he added. "It cannot be for long and it's not lost time; his preference will be remembered when the day of election comes. All that is wanted now is some sudden stroke, some public service to the Church, to bring your name boldly forward and so make assurance sure. But," and his voice deepened with significance, "if such a stroke is possible it had better not be long delayed."

And such a stroke Pandone told himself was certainly possible; nor, if Bianca had sense, would it be long delayed. She had the necessary wit, the brains; of that he was certain, but would she have that other quality without which wit and brains would be useless, a quality which could not be described by any one word, perhaps because many qualities went to its making—courage, audacity, endurance, initiative, self-sacrifice—the quality, in short, which despises risk and sinks self in the greatness of the object to be gained? He was not sure, but if it was there, and lacking in strength, he was prepared to stimulate it.

How? Two suggestions rose ready to his mind. As he had ridden past the tower of Stephani Petri his quick eye, alert for the moods of the people that he might turn them to advantage, had caught sight of Alessandro and Bianca on the balcony of Susanna Ligorio, the perfumer. The reputation of the place was notorious and, skilfully used, might turn a proud woman's no, into an abashed yes. Then there was always Malazzorbo. Knowing women as women had taught him to know them, he asked himself, What would she not do, having known Rome, rather than return to the grey life of Malazzorbo? But these, being in a nature of a threat, he would not hint unless driven; no sensible man threatens if he can persuade or cajole.

There was no time to waste, Montelengo had said; and Pandone wasted no time when Bianca was ushered into

his private apartments on the morning following the procession. And yet, for the moment, he was greatly preoccupied, scarcely sparing a moment to glance up as she entered and motion her to a stool placed to one side and a little in front of him, before plunging afresh into the study of a parchment, one of the many littering the table before him. His forehead was lined with care, and from time to time he passed a hand down his long beard in the unconsciousness of his anxious absorption.

In such an attitude he looked his best, handsome, capable, dignified, detached from the world, the figure of a great prelate who was possibly also a great man; an impressive figure, too, and Bianca felt the influence. Suddenly he sighed deeply, laid the parchment down, looked at it fixedly for a moment, then brushed it aside with restrained impatience and turned to Bianca.

"Surely the care of the Church is burden enough, and yet they thrust the weight of the world also on our shoulders. But the world itself is the care of the Church, so why complain! Only the burden grows heavy at times, and any help that can lighten it, furthering these great interests of righteousness, is the gift of God." It has been said already that Pandone had that gift of the orator which endows words with the power of profundity; now they were so endowed. "But such things cannot interest you—Rome with its life and gaiety, will be more to your taste. What do you think of Rome, my child?"

"You might as well ask me what do I think of the stars," answered Bianca, and meant what she said.

"A good answer." Pandone nodded comprehension and approval. "A very good answer, for Rome, truly, is the sky of the world. You saw the procession?"

"Yes, Father."

"Father?" repeated the Cardinal, and his tone was mild with regret rather than tinged with censure. Very

astutely, he added no more. None knew better than he that the neglect of twenty-four years is not palliated by a few smooth words. For that he trusted Emilia; love for the child might soften the natural resentment against the father. For the moment the gentle reproach was sufficient. "You saw His Holiness?"

"Yes, Father."

"A sun among stars, the glorious light of the Church's firmament." He sighed again and sat back in his chair, the wrinkles of anxious thought once more lining his forehead and running into a network of fine cobwebbing about the temples.

As to Bianca, if the neglect of twenty-four years was not palliated, the resentment was less actively present to her mind. And not just for Emilia's sake. Without question the dignity of the prelate and the apparent strength of the man impressed her, nor could her prejudice deny the greatness and splendour of the position he had climbed to unaided. The absorbing claims of his office might even plead some excuse. But not for a moment did she forget that she was there to learn why he had sent for her from Malazzorbo, therefore she continued to answer him guardedly.

"A sun among stars," repeated Pandone, his chin on his breast, his eyes fixed on the litter of parchments; it was as if his mind was far away, lost in the immensity of the Church's firmament. Then he roused himself, smiting the flat of the table with his palm in a gesture almost of despair. "And yet there are clouds, clouds, clouds. Aye, worse than clouds, the threat of an eclipse." Round he swung to Bianca, his head raised, a fire in his eyes. "The threat of an eclipse," he said again, "and that is why you are in Rome."

"Why—uncle?" The word came out almost against her will, startled from her, as it were. But Pandone

noted the change and felt that already a point was gained. "Why, what can I do?"

"Great things! Glorious things! A work for the Church, a work that calls for a man's courage, a woman's—" wile, he would have said, but the word sounded of doubtful meaning, and hastily he substituted "resource, a woman's devotion, a woman's clear insight to divide the true from the false. Surely, I said, as I thought upon the need for such qualities, I shall find all these in the blood of the Caldoreschi."

"Yes, Father?" she said, and both by the tone and the return to formality Pandone knew he had lost his gain. The appeal to the Caldoreschi had been a mistake; it did not ring true and it revived the memory of her grudge. Very wisely he abandoned sentiment and answered the inferred question.

"Briefly, it is this, and we have spoken of it once already. Seven years ago, at his coronation, the Emperor vowed he would head a Crusade to wrest the Holy Sepulchre from the Turk, a project dear to the heart of the Holy Father whom God in His Providence hath taken to Himself. That oath Frederick took at the hands of Cardinal Ugolino Conti, now, through the grace and love of God to His Church, the Church's head. Twice, for reasons which satisfied the indulgent heart of our late Holy Father, the departure for Palestine was put off, but always with renewals of the oath. You follow me, my child?"

"Yes, Father."

"Naturally you do; it is very simple. To go on. Two years ago, when the Emperor—always our good friend, you understand, always our good friend—renewed his oath to Cardinal Ugolino he fixed the August of this year for the assured sailing of the fleet. Nought but the grip of death, he swore, should hold him back from the Crusade. That vow the Church believed and accepted, but now—

listen, my child—now we are not so sure. Honorius is dead; may the Emperor not say in his heart: Death dissolves all bonds, forgetting that his vow is to God and the Church, who abide eternal, and not to the head who passes? We fear—we greatly fear. For if the Emperor may absolve himself at will there is an end to the sanctity of the altar, the Church is set at nought, her authority and sacred power are derided, and the Holy Father himself flouted with contempt before the face of the whole world.”

“Yes, Father,” said Bianca again as the Cardinal paused. The words were the same, but by her heightened colour and quickening interest Pandone judged that he had moved her.

“Would the Emperor mock God?” he went on, his sonorous voice deepening to an indignant solemnity. “Thrice he has sworn, twice he has been excused; this time there can be no excusal. Will he absolve himself and mock God? There are preparations in Palermo, yes—but what is in his heart? To play with the Church, to make a jest of his oath, or to obey? For the honour of the Church, and that she be not dragged in the mud of the world’s contempt, we must know the truth. Will the Crusade sail at the time appointed? Are the preparations at Palermo the truth or a lie? We must know, we must—must—must. For the honour of her altars the Church dare not be blindly tolerant, to find her tolerance a jest and byword. And yet, if the Emperor is sincere, if he venerates his oath as a Christian man and faithful son of the Church, God forbid that a breath of censure should blow upon him. But who can know the thoughts of a man but the man himself—or the woman he opens his heart to?” Again he paused, drawing a deep breath, and slowly added: “That is why you are in Rome.”

Uncertain of his meaning, the girl made no immediate

reply. Up to a point she had understood him clearly enough. Amongst other things, and perhaps more clearly than he intended, she understood that the Church feared rather than loved this good friend who was to fight her battles in the East. That much she had gathered from his shift of tone rather than from the words themselves. But when it came to her own usefulness the one clear hint at the last was so incredible, almost so monstrous, that with a "Yes, Father," she fell back on passivity. The attitude irritated Pandone, and he launched one of his threats.

"It is either that or Malazzorbo—Rome or Malazzorbo; you understand?"

"That?" she repeated. "What is that? No, I do not understand."

"Have I not just explained?" Leaning forward the Cardinal pushed the parchment this way and that impatiently. There are times when the nakedness of stark language is rather appalling. "We must know the Emperor's intentions—not just that there are preparations, not just that there are so many men gathering at Palermo, so many ships, such and such stores. All these the first bare-footed Franciscan can tell us in full detail. But will the ships sail? Are these preparations a blind? What is the Emperor's true purpose? Is he loyal to his oath, or playing with the Church? These we must know, and only a woman can make certain."

"Why, Father?"

"Why?" Here was the need for that stark language the Cardinal's soul abhorred. The girl had the looks; more than ever, as she sat five feet away looking him straight in the face with these warm-brown eyes of hers, and the flush of excitement on her cheeks, he admitted Rivara was right. Yes, she had the looks, but if she had the sense would there be the need for this distressing

plainness of speech? "How should I know? I am a child in such matters. But they say that at times Frederick is more influenced by women than by men."

"As Cardinal Montelengo is influenced?" she asked calmly, though her blood was hot and her pulses racing as the incredible became credible. "Cardinal Montelengo, with his cageful——"

"The venom of scandal," burst out Pandone. "It spatters both the Church and State. None can hope to escape its fouling. Two days ago we spoke of this, and I bade you think of it no more."

"Then it is all lies and scandal?" she persisted.

"Lies and half lies," he answered testily. "The Emperor is of the south—and Southerners—well, Southerners are warmer-blooded than men of the north. A woman's beauty moves them more easily, that is all."

"All?" she questioned, and sat silent. But Pandone ignored the question.

"Think of the honour—to lighten the heavy burden thrust upon our shoulders, to disperse the clouds obscuring the sun, to win the gratitude——"

"Why not Emilia?" she interrupted.

Pandone started violently and the blood rushed to his face in passion. "Emilia?" he cried harshly, but instantly controlled himself. "No. Emilia is but a child. Such service demands a woman; Emilia cannot go."

"Then there is danger?"

"Not danger, but there is a risk," he answered reluctantly.

"From the southern blood and the half-truth that is in the half-lie?"

"Are you afraid?"

"No." The word was as curtly spoken as his curt question. "But why should I go at all? Why do you move in the matter, you who are not the head of the Church?"

Pandone's impulse, partly because it came natural to him, but also partly because he had almost persuaded himself of its truth, was to revert to sentiment and his duty to the Church, but Bianca's face, less lovely than it had been because of its stern hint of indignant aversion, warned him that such a plea was foredoomed to failure. Not for a moment would she have believed it. Like a wise man he told the truth, and if he told it in the way best suited to further his ends, who shall blame him? Even a Cardinal is human.

"You were at the procession yesterday?"

"Yes, Father."

"You saw His Holiness?"

"Yes, Father."

"Then you saw the greatest thing in the world. Princes are his servants, kings his vassals, from him the Emperor himself takes his crown; where is there another such greatness? And yet, in the very hour when he takes his seat, throned in Saint Peter's as head of the Church with the Keys of Life in his hand, they burn a wisp of tow before him and say: 'Holy Father, so passes the glory of the world!' And the wisp flares up, smokes in a moment, then is gone in a breath."

He paused. This was a new Pandone. He had ceased to pose and was a man, a man with something of greatness in him. The fire in his eyes, the widening of the nostrils, the sincerity in the full voice, vouched for it. Against her will the recognition moved Bianca. She felt that what he had in his mind was the truth; was there not, then, perhaps truth in all that had gone before? But she held to her form of words.

"Yes, Father."

"A figure, you will say, an allegory. Yes, but for Gregory something more than a figure; it is almost a prophecy, for he is more than eighty years old. Three score years and

ten, by reason of strength four score years, but we soon fly away. The man passes, but the greatness remains. And who shall succeed him? Already he leans upon me, already, through him, the eyes of the Church turn to me. If one of my name won the Church's gratitude, resolving the Church's doubts, then—" again he paused, the briefest of pauses, and his voice, soft with a suggestion of pleading, thrilled her as many a time from the pulpit of some great church, it had thrilled the thousands who hung upon his words as on music. "Do you understand, my child? Your father's name writ in the long line of glorious greatness— Peter, Gregory, Leo, Hildebrand, Innocent, Pandone. God spare the Holy Father, God grant the Church his learning, his piety, his ripe wisdom for many years. But the world's eyes turn to the future; it is a law in our nature. And the burden is heavy, already the shoulders are bent under the weight of years. This very uncertainty as to the Emperor's purpose frets the spirit. Daughter, it is for you to decide." Very wisely he did not add: It is this or Malaz-zorbo.

CHAPTER XIII

IS LOVE NONSENSE?

BUT there was no need. Without the telling Bianca knew it was this or Malazzorbo, and the knowledge had its influence. Ignorance has this to its credit—it is often a great breeder of contentment. Life in Malazzorbo, brightened by her mother's love and the fierce, dog-like devotion of Tita and Giuseppi Sirani, had been sufficient. Even when the love was lost, swept away by the River of Time, as all human love must be, she had been satisfied not to look beyond her rut. But in all nature, human as well as that of the fields and woods, there are dormant buds, aspirations after fruition, unsuspected until the unusual or the violent forces them into active being. It may be a hacking at the roots of life, it may be the cutting down of the flowery promise of life, it may be some great stimulus. So was it with Bianca. A new growth possessed her, mind and spirit, and Malazzorbo could never again be as it had been. Yet, if she had been "afraid," as Pandone put it, she would have gone back to Malazzorbo without giving Capua or Rome a second thought.

But she was not afraid. That was the second influence at work in her mind. Pandone's obscure hint of risks that were not a danger were clear to her in spite of their remote allusion. To that the four-year-old tragedy of Malazzorbo helped her, as did the blind jests in the *atrium* and Pandone's slip two days earlier; a latter-day Herod, he had said, and then tried hastily to soften the description. But

she was not afraid; strong in her knowledge of herself she saw no cause for fear.

And beyond these there was a third influence. It was not just that Pandone played upon her responsive nature as a musician upon an instrument, though in a sense that was true, but she remembered her mother's debt of love for that long-dead father who, to her, was little more than a tradition. Had he lived would he not have gloried in this honour to his name, to see it, as the Cardinal had said, writ in the long line of glorious greatness, blazoned together with Leo, Gregory and Hildebrand on the Church's roll of honour? Surely he would, and surely she who, without repentance, had given up everything for his sake would have glorified with him.

As to this task which Pandone sought to thrust upon her, she saw it in two ways—a work for the Church, perhaps; for himself, for his own personal advantage, certainly. Twice the Emperor had taken the oath at the hands of the newly-elected Pope. Without doubt it would weaken Gregory's personal prestige, and degrade his office, if Frederick calmly set his vow aside. Without doubt, too, it was vital that the Holy See should know the truth in advance. In so far it was a work for the Church, but Bianca was firmly persuaded that had it not been even a greater work for himself the Cardinal would have left her to the rutted peace of Malazzorbo.

And his gain was clear. Let him go to Gregory with such proof as would set all doubt at rest and the service could never be forgotten to him, nor, already a Cardinal-Bishop, was there any reward but the one possible. True, it was against the laws of the Church to promise in advance a vote at any future Conclave, but at the proper time the service would be remembered; Pandone's gain was clear. That the fulfilment of her task would set her in opposition to Alvano, her newly-found cousin, did not

trouble Bianca. She owed nothing to the Caldoreschi, unless, indeed, she owed a revenge for their contemptuous ignoring of her mother.

"I have decided," she began. But Pandone interrupted her decision.

"There must be no mistake. Remember, it is not enough to go to Capua, not enough to probe and grope; you must find. We must know the truth beyond all doubt, we must—must."

"No matter what the risk? But I am not afraid, and I will go on one condition—that the Holy Father approves."

It was Pandone's turn to be silent in thought. What, he wondered, had prompted that condition? His impulse was to brush it aside with a strong hand; it was so clearly a relief to the Holy Father's anxious mind that necessarily he must approve. But the determination on Bianca's face warned him to caution; she was her mother's daughter, and the Caldoras were not easily driven. To temporise was the obvious expedient.

"The Holy Father, my child? Can you doubt it?"

"There is much I can doubt," answered the girl drily. "When the Holy Father tells me he approves I will go."

"Tells you? The Holy Father? My child! at such a time as this the Holy Father is too much occupied——"

But she broke in on his protests without ceremony. "Vital, you said; the honour of the Church, the sanctity of her altars; surely five minutes can be spared for these? If not, there can be no need for risks."

Again His Eminence sat silent, his hand combing his beard with rapid, nervous sweeps. Under the pressure of necessity he was shifting his point of view. His idea had been to keep his project secret until such time as he had secured absolute assurance of the Emperor's faith or unfaith. But was that course essential? Was Father Pieretti

not right when he hinted that Gregory would welcome with gratitude any possibility of solving the problem which was his greatest anxiety of the moment. And if the project proved barren, if Bianca's beauty and sense in combination failed, would he not always have the attempt to his credit? On the whole he inclined to think that, all unwittingly, Bianca had shown him a better way.

"It will be difficult," he said slowly, his brows knit, his eyes narrowed as if in thought as, almost naturally, he fell back into his pose again, "very, very difficult. Every hour is packed with the duties of three. But I shall do my best. Wait here—in your own apartment, I mean—until I return." His gaze ran over her in keen scrutiny. "Yes, as you are will do; no jewelry, no adornment, a black lace scarf for your head but not so draped that it hides your face. In an hour I should be back. I think His Holiness will receive me at once, but I can promise nothing—nothing."

For that hour of waiting Bianca would have preferred to have been left to herself. She was like a ship at sea, driven by storm through obscurity to strange waters, and had much need to make sure of her position. But Emilia would not be denied, and the elder girl's preparations, simple though they were, a discarding of ribbons or brooches, a more primly-careful braiding of the hair and the adjustment of the black lace scarf, one of her mother's few possessions, filled her with curiosity.

"Are you going out, cousin Bianca?"

"Yes, dear, with your uncle."

"Why don't you say our uncle? No! don't tell me, for it hurts me that you should think of him like that. Not that I blame you. I would have died in that dull Malazzorbo, or turned into a turnip and then a cow would have eaten me. Where are you going, cousin?"

"To see the Holy Father."

For a moment Emilia sat open-mouthed, all her light gaiety of idle jest gone from her, then, to Bianca's intense astonishment, she burst into tears.

"I know why you are going. We are too foolish and empty-headed to please you. I can't help it, I'm just what I was born and I always will be. But you want to be a woman Saint Francis, and go about in bare feet and a rope, like the monks who eat so much at dinner." She paused, her under lip pushed out in decision. "If you do I will join you and be a nun, too. At least"—again she paused and a gleam of sunshine showed behind the rain, "you would allow a poor sister to marry, would you not, cousin Bianca, if—if—I don't quite know if what!"

What could Bianca do but laugh. "Where do you learn such nonsense?"

"Is love nonsense, cousin Bianca?"

"I did not mean that, but I know nothing at all about it."

"No; I was sure Malazzorbo was dull. But you will know soon. Wait until you have been in Rome a month—no, a month is too long, a week should be enough. But I forgot, you are going to see the Holy Father, and already you have made your hair like a nun's. Cousin Bianca, you must choose a white habit; you will look lovely in white."

"But that is nonsense. I have no such thought."

"Then why are you going?"

"Because I have need of advice," answered Bianca slowly. It was the truth, but not the whole truth.

"Then I should ask uncle—or Signor Rivara; Signor Rivara is very wise," said Emilia sedately, but with a sudden little flush of colour. "The Pope? A bloodless, old, dry stick! I think he was born a priest and I'm sure he never was young."

"Then you know him?"

The flush that had risen to Emilia's cheeks when she referred to Rivara deepened, and she looked aside in evident embarrassment.

"Cousin Bianca, I think he did not approve of—of 'Sandro and me. Of course, though we always say 'uncle' we understand as everyone understands. Whenever he came to the palace, and he did not come often, we never appeared. That is not why I called him a withered stick," she went on hastily, her face now flaming. "But all Rome knows he is a priest first and a priest last and nothing but a priest. And men who are nothing but priests—well, I don't think their advice can be very wise. They only know souls and not the flesh and blood, and where would the soul be if flesh and blood did not go with it? Not on earth, I think."

It was then that the Cardinal knocked at the door, and, being bidden, entered. He checked his evident haste at sight of Emilia perched on the edge of Bianca's bed, one foot tucked under her, the other just visible below the hem of her long white skirt as she swung a silk slipper on the point of her toes. But ignoring her he at once addressed Bianca.

"Are you ready?" Then her changed appearance struck him and he turned her to the light. "Chut! chut! What have you done to yourself? Loosen your hair; now bring it more forward—more still; yes, that is better. Why spoil what God gave you? Your scarf—not so much over your face and looser—looser. Um! that will do."

"Cousin Bianca," said Emilia, "I said you were not meant for a nun. Shall you be back for dinner, uncle, or may I tell 'Sandro he will lose nothing if he dines with one of his friends? Poor 'Sandro! Why is he not eight years older?"

"Eh? 'Sandro?" The Cardinal came out of his critical study of Bianca with a start. "I am very angry with

'Sandro, brawling in the very line of the procession. He will make our name hated in Rome.”

“But indeed, uncle, it was they who brawled with him. Poor 'Sandro! Had it not been for Signor Alvano—Cousin Bianca, that is the second time Signor Alvano has played paladin. I wonder if he thinks you were meant for a nun? If he were only a prince or a grand duke——”

“We shall not be long away,” said Pandone, breaking in on the characteristic inconsequent chatter that was not all inconsequent. “Come, my child, we must not keep the Holy Father waiting.”

CHAPTER XIV

GREGORY THE NINTH

THE guard, with the Cardinal's litter, was in attendance at the door. Neither uncle nor niece spoke. By their route, which Bianca recognized, the girl knew that Gregory had returned to the Vatican. Progress was rapid. With the procession the holidays had ended until the dead Pope's funeral, which, following custom, would be on the ninth day, and the city had resumed its normal routine. Shops were open, hawkers crying their wares, craftsmen—smiths, potters, weavers, armourers and the like—busy before their doors. The streets were full of life and the glitter of wealth. Litters, gay, gorgeous, or simply utilitarian, met them every few yards; the air was rhythmic with the tramp of guards, as nobles or the greater churchmen went about their business, risking no hazard from private foes; up and down the main thoroughfares and narrow lanes the steady flow of common folk moved this way and that, intent upon the day's work.

Though the stir was less in volume it was more truly the life of a great city, and its varied human interests appealed more strongly to Bianca than the rush and turmoil of the past feverish days. Rome or Malazzorbo? Involuntarily she glanced at Pandone. But the Cardinal, his hands in his lap, was staring into vacancy: his long interview with Gregory had left him uncertain of the outcome. It was not even clear that his zeal had been understood, or, if understood, appreciated rightly.

Her thoughts turned forward. All unconsciously Emilia

had confirmed her in the wisdom of this appeal to the Pope. Quite clearly, Gregory knew, and his austerity disapproved, of Pandone's so-called niece and nephew. What other attitude was possible in one who was a priest first and last, and always a priest? That being so, and knowing the risks His Eminence had vaguely but not doubtfully hinted, he would surely advise her aright. The deduction seemed reasonable. But Bianca forgot that men of one idea are apt to see nothing beyond that idea: at times, too, they lose sight of the means in their eagerness to secure the coveted end.

At the foot of the flight of steps leading up to the *atrium* of old St. Peter's they quitted the litter, and mounting, crossed the open space on foot, inclining always a little to the right. Though there was no such crowd as on the declaration of the Conclave, the great square was pulsing with animation and colour. The events of the past few days had drawn to Rome multitudes of ecclesiastics of all grades, and it was natural that this outer court, holy with the sacred memories of a thousand years, should be their rallying-point. The scarlet, purple, and white of the lords of the Church mingled with the sober browns and black of the monks or humbler clergy: nor, purple being the Papal mourning, did sorrow for the departed Vicar of Christ darken the scene; rather, it added to the volume and play of colour. Women were numerous, chiefly *contadine*, bare-legged, bare-footed, in their short black skirts, gay bodices and striped head-gear.

Now progress slackened. Pandone's personality was so well known that at almost every step he had to pause to exchange greetings, acknowledge salutations, or bestow his benediction: many of the peasant women waiting on their knees until he had passed. Twice he only succeeded in breaking away from importunity by protesting, "Not now, my friend, not now: I have an audience with the Holy

Father and cannot delay." He never once glanced at Bianca, nor in his protest did he raise his voice, but he was not sorry that she saw and heard. It must, he shrewdly surmised, all have its influence.

And without doubt he was right. Reverence in others begets reverence in ourselves, worship begets worship, as like begets like. In that brief passage across the *atrium* His Eminence took on a greatness Bianca had never before accorded him in her thoughts. And if this reverence, this respect and worship—in the old sense of the word—were his due, what was due to him, who, by the power of the Spirit of God, held the keys? The awe of the thought was appalling, and as she climbed the few stairs from the courtyard to the portico of the great church, her knees trembled under her so violently that, at the top, as they turned to the right under the vaulted roof, she clung to Pandone for support. The Cardinal understood the message of the shaking hands.

"Courage, my child. To the willing and obedient he is a loving father, but to the froward——" a gesture ended the sentence.

In those days there was no Scala Regia, and the public entrance to the Vatican Palace was through a door which opened upon the northern end of the portico. Here stood a single sentinel, so lightly armed that one who did not know that the entire lower story was a barrack would have said, See how the Holy Father trusts his people and is beloved by them! But for the moment the true guard was a group of Gregory's household, who kept the door with scrupulous watchfulness, permitting none to enter who was unknown, or whose business in the palace was doubtful.

Through these Pandone and Bianca passed without question, the former declining the offer of a lackey to announce his coming.

"Unnecessary, my friends, quite unnecessary: His Holiness is expecting me at this moment." He spoke in a low whisper, as if unwilling to break the silence.

And the silence was profound, so profound that it bred in Bianca afresh the sense of awe. In the courtyard the rasping tramp of feet, the rough hum of voices, the echoes from the Borgo and the greater city beyond the Tiber, had been harsh and insistent with the clamour of common life: here many were coming and going, but they passed as shadows, treading softly, it seemed to the girl, as Moses of old must have trodden, unshod, on holy ground.

The air of the broad staircase was cool and grey, and with every step she mounted, following Pandone, Bianca's heart beat more quickly, her skin creeping upon her as it had crept three days before in the *atrium*. Holy ground! Surely there was a parallel? The Vicar of Christ upon earth was in this place, and through him, as in the bush that burned, yet was not consumed, the quenchless light of the Church blazed to the world. Through the booming of the blood in her ears came the voice of the lean-faced, ascetic priest, "The greatest thing in the world—the greatest—the greatest." As if swept by a chill she drew in her breath shudderingly through closed teeth.

Of the many coming and going most saluted the Cardinal, but none spoke, nor did he pause in his slow, noiseless ascent. At the stairhead Bianca could not have told whether he turned to right or left, she only knew he went forward, and that she followed, her feet like lead under her, and her knees trembling. In the broad, dim corridor there were many quiet shadows, mostly motionless in patience, hoping for an audience or waiting instructions for the many ceremonies, funeral pomps and coronation glories incidental to the change in the Papacy. Through these His Eminence, as before, passed unchallenged, pausing only at an open door near the end of the passage. And the pause

was only momentary, the instant he was recognized the young noble on guard stood aside with a deep reverence. Half turning, Pandone took Bianca by the arm and led her into the room.

Here perhaps a score were assembled, Princes of the Church, prelates, nobles, and officials of the Papal court. If, split up into groups, they spoke much and with emphatic gestures, it was in such low whispers that the silence which followed Pandone's entrance scarcely deepened the quiet. But it was on Bianca that all eyes were turned: at such a moment cardinals were more common than women in the ante-room of His Holiness.

Roused partly by this scrutiny, but also partly by the consciousness that there was a crisis to be met, the girl forced a self-control upon her shaken nerves and looked round her. Tapestries representing scenes in the lives of the apostles covered the walls, but except for two padded benches placed under the high-pitched window the room was entirely devoid of furniture: three silver lamps hung by chains from the ceiling of carved cedar-wood. Besides the open door at her back a second, masked by curtains, pierced the wall at the side.

Pandone, too, glanced round, alert and observant. He knew every man present, knew him for a friend or an enemy: in such a sharp conflict of interests indifference or neutrality was scarcely possible. From the group before the curtains, the largest group in the room, a bowed, meagre figure came quickly forward to greet Pandone with both hands outstretched: Bianca recognized him as that Cardinal Otho who had announced the election to the crowd in the *atrium* three days before.

"Welcome, dear Father, welcome," he whispered, taking Pandone by the elbows and looking up into his face with something both of deference and admiration. "Castiglione is within, but if you wish I shall send word that

you are here; without doubt His Holiness will dismiss him and spare your time."

"Thank you, dear Father," answered Pandone, a dry significance in his voice, "but, as at other times, I can wait."

A third member of the Curia joined them, Valsoldo, Cardinal-deacon of San Casciano. Honorius had advanced him to the purple on Pandone's recommendation and in return the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte had received his steady support in the Conclave until Montelengo's stroke of statecraft elected Gregory.

"Twice within the last twenty minutes His Holiness has asked for you," he said to Pandone.

"No, no: once only," protested Otho, "and then he said Honorius was better served."

"The impatience of his great—office," answered Pandone still drily. "But he will not have to wait longer. See, dear Father, the door is opening."

Noiselessly, on its padded rings, the curtains slipped aside, and Castiglione, whom the mob had so heartily hissed at the tower of Stephani Petri, entered from the inner room. Betwixt the two doors he paused a moment with a sweeping gesture of an arm that embraced all present.

"Ah! signors and Fathers, what a blessed choice—a Vicar of Christ indeed! Now may the foes of the Church look to themselves!"

"Um," whispered Valsoldo, as Otho hurried through the still open door to the inner room, "at the least it is an abbey for a son, perhaps a bishopric. But then, his brother's support in the Conclave deserves reward: he is an obstacle in the path, dear friend." But Pandone answered him aloud, his great voice clearly to be heard even in the corridor.

"Yes, a great soul for a great need, though God grant the Emperor holds to his oath."

It was then Otho returned: he had been Camerlengo under Honorius, and re-appointed by Gregory. "His Holiness will receive you at once, dear Father."

"Alone—unless there are orders to the contrary."

"There are no special orders."

"Then alone, it is the service of the Church: come, my child," and taking Bianca by the arm he led her towards the door. There he looked back an instant, and his eyes met those of Montelengo. It was as if he said, "You see, there is no delay," then he crossed the threshold, Bianca following, and the door closed softly.

With a deep genuflexion, his head bowed, his hands crossed upon his breast, Pandone stood aside. Uninstructed, Bianca, too, waited in silence. Her mind was a battle-ground of memories, of flying phrases caught and never forgotten—the Vicar of Christ—a grey, old wolf—a father indeed. What she saw, before she bent her head, was a meagre figure all in white, seated on a high-backed chair with carved arms a few feet from the opposite wall: even the flowing robe, caught in loosely at the waist and descending in sweeping curves from chin to ankle, could not disguise the meagreness.

His hands, thin, white and long-fingered, rested in his lap: a white skull-cap covered his head, from under the close-fitting edge locks of grey hair strayed almost to the shoulders. His only ornaments, if ornaments they could be called, were his Fisherman's ring and an ivory crucifix, hung by a gold chain upon his breast, nor were they worn as ornaments, they were the insignia and significance of his great office. His face—Bianca was never quite certain of the face. Womanlike, her mind retained more clearly the generalities of his dress, his attitude of weariness as he leaned back in the angle of the great chair, his marvellous, unforced assertion of an incomparable dignity, rather than any assured knowledge of his face. But, the light being

from the side, she had an impression of a high, wide forehead, a full eye, a prominent, arched nose, broad in the nostril, a sunken cheek, a thin-lipped mouth, and large, strong chin, outlined against the brightness as a carving in a cameo.

"The dove of peace," said a thin, clear voice. The harsh, stern, dominant note of warning and menace so unmistakable at Stephani Petri had gone out of it, but Bianca knew it at once. "Obedience brings peace," it had said, with a subtle, suggested threat for all who rashly disobeyed. "Come nearer, daughter—here, by my foot-stool." He motioned with his hand and, hardly conscious that she had moved, Bianca found herself kneeling on a cushion at his feet, but a little to one side so that the light shone full upon her. "The blessing of peace upon those who bring peace, and that is what you would do, is it not?"

"Yes, Holy Father."

"In the temple of the Living God there are all manner of builders," went on the thin, clear voice. "Some lay its stones in order, some rear up the pillars of it, some carve its beauty, some work unseen. Men, their fellows, know them not, the unseen workers, and the praise of men passes them by; but the temple is the Lord's temple and the Dweller within it knows." His eyes searched her face keenly while he spoke, clear, luminous eyes, bright with the power of a strong intellect unimpaired by his more than eighty years. "Take courage, daughter, and the Dweller in the temple Himself keep thee in safety. His Eminence has informed us of your purpose: may it bring peace to the troubled mind of the Church. For ourselves, we do not doubt the Emperor's good faith—God forbid that we should. But assurance there must be lest the Church seem a scorn to the world, and contempt fall upon the chosen of the Spirit, Frederick——" A sudden spasm shook him at the name, his eyes blazed with the light of a fierce passion,

and a flush chased away the pallor of the sunken cheeks. But instantly he calmed. "Frederick is our good son. But at times sons forget their fathers and we must know the truth. The work of the Church is the work of God, her peace is Christ's peace; daughter, is it your will to do this work that peace may come?"

"Yes, Holy Father." It had been her intention to lay her position particularly and clearly before Gregory, claiming advice and counsel in her difficulty. But the tremendous assumptions had filled her anew with a sense of awe, forcing upon her a recognition of her own insignificance, so that even to repeat the three words taxed all her powers.

"Good." He glanced up at Pandone, standing motionless near the door. "His Eminence, our dear brother beloved, will make your plan smooth for you. And now, daughter, the God of all power and peace lead you to the truth and have you in His keeping." Leaning forward, he stretched out his hand, and Bianca, stooping, kissed the Fisherman's ring upon it. On her bent head the other hand rested an instant in a light touch scarcely to be felt. "God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit, bless you, my child," he said solemnly.

Rising to her feet Bianca curtsied to the floor, and stepping backward felt the Cardinal take her by the arm. Next instant he led her through the door directly into the passage, and she heard the clang of a hand-bell as Gregory summoned his Camerlengo. She had had her answer.

CHAPTER XV

HIS EMINENCE CONDESCENDS A SECOND TIME

THEREAFTER events moved rapidly with Bianca. An embassy, part lay, part clerical, was being despatched to Capua to announce formally to the Emperor Gregory's accession to the pontificate, and Pandone decided that Bianca should travel with it under the care of Ursula di Crescenzo, the wife of its lay head. Such an arrangement secured two benefits, if not three—an adequate guard would be provided through an unsettled tract of country, the girl's entrance to Capua would be unobtrusive, nor would explanations of her presence be necessary; that she travelled under the care, or in the suite of the wife of the lay head to the embassy, answered all questions, and assured her position at the Court of the Emperor.

But in Rome there were questions to answer and Emilia was inconsolable. Why should cousin Bianca go at all? Emilia had a dozen dreams in her head for this newly-discovered cousin, and here was a swift awakening—why should Bianca go at all? Pandone's answer was plausible if not convincing; Bianca had other cousins, also strangers to her; it was right she should make up her mind which she preferred.

"But they have not asked her to go to them," cried Emilia, half in tears.

"My child," answered the Cardinal with grieved dignity, "do not shame me by reminding me of my own neglect," whereat Emilia, in her whirlwind fashion, had flown into his arms with loud protestations of repentance; she had never thought to hint such a reproach.

But though Emilia remained unreconciled a need arose which tempered her regret, it even brought some warmth of comfort. While three new gowns might suffice for the first few days in Rome they were ridiculously inadequate for the niece of the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte at the most polished court in Europe, that is to say, in the world, and with only five days for preparation Emilia was first of all in despair and then plunged to the crown of her sleek, black head in an ocean of tumultuous excitement.

Three gowns? There must be three times three; had time allowed Emilia would have insisted on thirty-three, so determined was she that Caldora should not think shame of Pandone. Nor were gowns all; there must be laces, ribbons, kerchiefs, gloves, gauntlets, slippers, shoes, head-gear—the list is almost endless and defies enumeration. Add yet further the hundred and one accessories to a cunning toilet, the perfumes, the powders, the unguents, the pomanders unknown in Malazzorbo but indispensable to any woman of fashion in Rome or Capua, and it is no wonder that Emilia's brain was in a whirl. Nor, this time, did Bianca object. To play her part she must dress her part, and few women have entire faith in the unaided arts of the beggar-maid.

After much consideration the Cardinal decided to honour the Albergo del Sole with a second visit. Frankness seemed to him wisdom. That Alvano should learn unexpectedly of his cousin's presence in Capua might rouse suspicions and prejudice Bianca in her task. But this time he left Father Pieretti behind in the litter and entered the inn alone. The apple-cheeked chaplain might be his shadow, but not even to his shadow did Pandone confide all that was in his mind.

"Signor Alvano?" he asked, his tone that of one who seeks an old and valued friend.

"Yes, your Eminence—within. Your Eminence is fortunate—that is, Signor Alvano is fortunate not to miss your Eminence; he is so much abroad."

"In the Saint Zosimo Chamber, as before, I suppose?"

The host smirked, rubbing his hands as he bowed. "No, your Holiness, no—the Pandone chamber, by your Eminence's grace. Alas, that I shall not live to see it Saint Pandone."

"Alas, nor I," answered the Cardinal drily. "Lead the way, my friend."

At the head of the stairs Alvano was in waiting. Drawn to the window by the commotion he had recognised the Cardinal's liveries and put his own construction on the repeated visit—with yesterday's events as a pretext His Eminence would again be curious in the Emperor's affairs. In that, as we know, Alvano was wrong; His Eminence had already taken his own way of resolving the doubts of the Church, and was busied now about his own affairs. Yet his first words sustained Alvano's theory.

"Debt added to debt," he began, but interrupted himself. "No, no, no," he protested, as Alvano, with every demonstration of respect, stooped to kiss his ring "not as between friends. Besides," he added, with heavy humour, "we all know the Emperor, your master, is half a heretic."

"A heretic? the Emperor?" began Alvano. But Pandone waved him down with one hand while he laid the other in the crook of the Southerner's arm.

"I did but jest. Evil tongues are never silent, but the Emperor's love and devotion are an answer to their venom that the Church most gratefully accepts." He turned to the landlord: "My friend, you need come no further, Signor Alvano will conduct me to this Pandone chamber of yours. I trust, signor, you do not regret your saint?"

"Not I," answered Alvano, laughing. "The boot is on

the other leg; I have to thank your Eminence for an unspeakable change for the better."

"Um," said Pandone, leaning heavily on the arm he held, "I never knew the man yet who was worse for the Church's friendship. And this is the Pandone room?" He looked about him approvingly as he sank back into a padded chair. "Almost like Capua in its luxury, Signor Alvano. A pleasant change indeed. Well, I blame no man for sleeping softly; it is not the sleeping that counts, signor, it is the waking. And that brings me to my debt, for Alessandro's debt is mine and none can say that the Pandones are ungrateful. Yesterday, at Stephani Petri—"

"Your Eminence, Signor Alessandro would have done the like in a like case."

"And so you will not be thanked? You gentlemen of the South who serve the Emperor have a fine chivalry. But the debt remains, and I fear you will think, before I have finished, that I take a poor way of paying it. Signor Alvano, Alessandro would not have cried, God and the Emperor! right in the heart of this free city of Rome, and almost into the ears of both Pope and Senator; was that wise?"

"Yes, your Eminence, if to live at all is wisdom; we had died else, Pandone and Alvano alike. And why not call on my master and his master in my need? I know no better call."

"A good answer," and Pandone nodded his head as, stroking his beard gently, he looked up at Alvano. "A good answer between friends, that is, though none to His Holiness or Benincasa. And Alessandro was foolish, I do not deny it for a moment. But the boy is young; you cannot look for the grey head on green shoulders—you know the proverb."

"I would look for more wisdom in his father's son than to rouse the frenzy of a Roman mob," answered Alvano

drily. "You hinted a warning, Cardinal, I will speak one plainly—Let Signor Alessandro beware of Roman mobs; they may do him an ill turn yet."

Pandone stiffened in his chair. "Were they truly dangerous?"

"Dangerous? My crime, 'God and the Emperor!' checked them, but in the end it was my cousin who saved both him and me."

Here was the Cardinal's opportunity, promptly he seized it.

"And to our great sorrow we are losing her for a time. She wishes—the natural curiosity of her age, Signor Alvano—to see the land whence her mother sprang. For myself I cannot wonder at it. She goes south to Capua in five days."

"It is strange, but she said nothing of this yesterday."

"Strange? Surely not. With the mob howling in her ears she had other things to think of. Had you crossed our threshold—but no! you prefer to keep us continually in your debt. Signor Alvano, were you but going south I would commend my niece to your care in Capua. But remember, she seeks nothing of her cousins—no favours, no patronage. I doubt if, in her heart, she claims cousinship, for all her curiosity. She has her pride. Pandone does not choose to remember what Caldora has forgotten," which was true enough, since both Pandone and Caldora had equally ignored Malazzorbo.

"No commendation is necessary, your Eminence; she is my cousin as well as your niece. When does she leave Rome?"

"In five days. His Holiness is sending an embassy to announce his elevation, and Bianca travels in its train. A girl's whim, but to my mind a doubtful one." Rising, he laid a friendly hand on Alvano's shoulder. "God and the Emperor!" he repeated, and shook his head in play-

ful reproof. "Signor Alvano, at times the air of Rome is unhealthy even in March. I say no more."

Side by side, Pandone's hand still on the Southerner's shoulder, they descended the stairs talking of the splendour of the past day's procession.

"His Holiness—he is not in his first youth—bore the fatigue well, I trust?" asked Alvano.

"Marvellously well, thank God! Twice he has received me to-day, though thronged with duties." His Eminence turned to the waiting host. "My friend, the Pandone room will bring me a dangerous reputation for luxury. Signor Alvano, do not forget that it is best for a man to endure hardness with the saints," and smiling, smooth, suave, His Eminence went upon his way leaving behind him the memory of a gracious and genial condescension. None knew better than he that trifling courtesies, like small change in coinage, circulate readily among the people, and that, in the long run, the people are the masters.

Once, during these five days, Rivara unburdened his perplexed anxiety for Emilia's cousin. His patron, being sure of the secretary's disapproval, had kept his own counsel, but remembering the urgent summons from Malazzorbo Rivara utterly discredited the story of Bianca's curiosity in cousinship. His Eminence was not the man to bring his niece to Rome that she might follow her whims at his expense, nor had what passed on the night of the election been forgotten. On the other hand, the reception by Gregory puzzled him, confusing the issue, so that the utmost his anxiety ventured was to invite a confidence.

"Signorina, as between friends—we are friends, are we not?—is this wise?"

"Friends certainly." As Bianca replied something in the firm, almost stern, set of her face reminded him of their first meeting in the kitchen at Malazzorbo. "As to the wisdom—is it only a week ago you told me that in

Rome I must not say all I thought? Signor Rivara, I am not saying all I think, but I will tell you this—I am sure of myself.”

“Remember,” he said, “there is always Malazzorbo.”

“Have no doubt that I remember. I have had too little love in my life to forget Tita and Giuseppi, but so long as I am sure of myself there is no need for Malazzorbo.”

But it was an interview with the Countess di Crescenzo that brought the imminence of her venture more clearly home to Bianca than all Emilia’s robes and milliners. The great lady knew nothing of the secret wheels at work. For her it was sufficient that His Holiness had expressed to her husband—a cousin of that Cardinal John Colonna who had secured Gregory’s election—an interest in the girl’s desire to see something of her mother’s relatives. That she was half a Caldora was in itself a commendation to one who never ceased to deplore that, in the democracy of the Church, a Pandone should wear the purple. Had anyone suggested that the first Bishop of Rome had been a fisherman, she would have replied that she had no intention of taking either her manners or her customs from the Jews.

“Leave us to ourselves for half an hour, Cardinal,” she said in her brisk, autocratic way, having first paid punctilious respect to His Eminence’s high office. “Women are never natural when there are men about. We shall get to know each other all the sooner if you are not present.” And though she had courtseyed deeply and kissed his ring a second time Pandone was glad to go: never yet had he been quite sure of himself with the Countess di Crescenzo.

“Men about?” she repeated when the door was closed. “With priests and lackeys I always have a doubt. Yet we must have them: we could not live without the one or die without the other. Come to the light, child, that I may see you. Um, not so much of a child, and nothing at

all of a Pandone. But I might have guessed it: Gregory is too wise an old fox to send anyone south who would disgrace the Church. Now sit on that stool there and talk to me about yourself."

But though Bianca obeyed she never forgot Rivara's warning. While she spoke freely of Malazzorbo, of her mother, of the dim memories of her long-dead father and her mother's uncomforted sorrow, she said nothing of the tragedy of four years past, nor of their poverty, nor the Cardinal's neglect. Nor was her reticence all due to Rivara's warning. Instinctively she felt that what filled her with horror would seem but a commonplace to her listener. As to her uncle, she resented for her father's sake the calm despidal which swept all the name of Pandone into the one net of contempt simply because they were Pandone. That was never the opinion of the gentle gentlewoman, her mother. So, for pride's sake, and her dead father's sake, the Cardinal's neglect was covered up.

But the shrewd, keen eyes of the warm-hearted, outspoken autocratic woman of the world saw behind the veil.

"There is little wonder she should wish to see the Caldoreschi," she told her husband that night. "She is one of them, root and branch. But why should His Eminence remember her so suddenly after twenty years, only to rid himself of her in a week?"

Marco di Crescenzo thought for a moment. "There is another girl Pandone, I think. Perhaps she is jealous of her stranger cousin? Trust a priest's cat to scratch if robbed of her cream."

A slander on Emilia, but the explanation sufficed: being a slander it was all the more easily believable.

CHAPTER XVI

ALVANO OF THE ARNO FORD

It was a great spectacle, the blessing of the embassy in the church of Saint John of the Lateran on the morning of departure. Of the building of Bianca's day probably nothing now remains, but then, as now, it was the Mother and Head of all churches, taking precedence, at times, even of Saint Peter's.

His Holiness, in full pontificals, officiated at the high altar, assisted by cardinals and prelates in such a glory of crimson, purple and gold that minor dignitaries were like silver in the days of Solomon, nothing accounted of. Except for a Papal consecration it was the most splendid gathering in any Roman church since the Emperor had kissed the Pope's foot on the day of his crowning in St. Peter's with all the pomp of the Holy Roman Empire—the Cross, the Sword, the Sceptre, the Lance, the Golden Apple. Perhaps Gregory had it in his mind to refresh Frederick's memory by this unwonted magnificence: it was a reminder that the Church had abated no jot of her rights and sacred authority.

The congregation was no less splendid. The great Guelf families resident in Rome, the Colonnas, the Anibaldi, the Savelli, the Graziani, the Castiglioni, and a score more, firm supporters of the Pope as against the Emperor, however they might quarrel among themselves, were all present, with Benincasa, the Senator, to lend the weight of the city's official approval. That Crescenzo, and those who rode south with him, were clad soberly, with here and there a flash of steel or a grim hint of mail, only served to heighten

the lavish magnificence of the throng surrounding them as they knelt in a group in the middle of the church before the altar rails.

Behind, Bianca knelt with the countess: behind them were their women, behind them the grooms and men-at-arms who formed the guard, together with a cluster of friars, both black and grey, who travelled under Crescenzo's protection.

If the girl was consumed with something of the awe which had shaken her five days before in the Vatican it was no wonder. All her life she had been accustomed to the simplicity of the little church in Malazzorbo, with its four bare, whitewashed walls dimly lit by small, high-pitched windows, its crude altar table unadorned except for a single cross, the sacred vessels in ill-kept brass, a pair of heavy candlesticks and a single swinging lamp. Now the splendour of the altar-service, paten and chalice, pyx, monstrance and reliquary; all of gold and glittering with gems, the towering many-branched candelabra ablaze with lights, the solemn sadness of the marble Christ, heart-broken for the world's sin, the silver censers, the wreaths of incense rising like the prayers of saints, the slow, sonorous chant swelling with the deepening peal of the organ, all compelled an abashment where exaltation struggled for place with holy reverence. And the central figure of it all was he who had said, The work of the Church is the work of God—go in peace.

But if the glory and magnificence of the ceremonial within the church raised her, as it were, to the gate of heaven itself, the scene without, fronting the approach, speedily brought her down to earth. Here the common folk of the city were gathered in a dense throng, an open space in front of the church doors being kept clear with difficulty by the Papal guard. Nor was it altogether a friendly crowd: cries of, "God and the Emperor!" grew to such a

volume that Crescenzo, his foot already in the stirrup, turned back to draw aside his cousin Colonna.

"You hear them, Giovanni? God and the Emperor! Warn His Holiness that the beast is on the prowl. Let him feed it or cow it, lest it bite."

"Bah!" answered Colonna, "the Crusade will end that folly. With God and Gregory here, and the Emperor in Palestine, the beast will get to his lair again. The Crusade, cousin, the Crusade; there must be the Crusade: you understand?" and Crescenzo nodded, turning down steps again to where his squire held his horse.

Pandone had said his farewells before the ceremony. As Emilia was present at the time, midway between tears and a child's happy excitement, he was unable to urge any final instructions and had the wisdom to avoid the religiosity which might have seemed natural to the occasion; perhaps it was a sense of the fitness of things, perhaps he had come to respect his niece's frankness of reply and feared to provoke a retort.

"In every need," he said, "apply to Crescenzo; he will honour every demand. Your waiting-woman is experienced and faithful: I think, my child, you need have no fears amongst those cousins you are so anxious to meet, strangers though they are."

"No stranger than you were, Father," answered Bianca, "and yet I was not afraid: nor, of course, had I any cause for fear."

"And remember," he added paternally, "there is always Rome." Then, somewhat hastily, he gave her his benediction, which Bianca received with sincere humility, distinguishing, and rightly, between the office and the man.

Emilia's farewells were said on the steps of the Lateran. She was then frankly all tears, and Bianca's heart was touched as it had not been even at the separation from Tita in Malazzorbo. In that tempestuous parting there had been

a strange mingling of resentment, anger and respect with the peasant woman's fierce passion of affection; here it was all the poignant sorrow of bruised love.

"I can go no further, cousin Bianca," wept the child-woman, "but Cosimo will ride with you as far as he may."

"Cosimo!" whispered Bianca, searching for a future happiness to comfort a present misery.

"I always call him Cosimo when I am in trouble. Cousin Bianca, you will not always stay in the south with these cousins who do not want you?"

"Be sure," answered Bianca, kissing her, "I shall not stay where I am not wanted," and in her thoughts she added, There is always Malazzorbo; the Cardinal's "There is always Rome" had, she knew, its reservations.

As she rode through the crowded streets towards the Porto San Giovanni, with Alessandro on one side and Rivara on the other, it seemed to Bianca as if Rome always kept holiday. Often one or other had to fall back to avoid collision with the loungers, and when it was Pandone she was thankful—it checked for a moment the stream of inconsequent chatter, a compound of half amorous lament and gasconade, he thought appropriate to the occasion. Rivara, with greater comprehension, rode in silence.

But once beyond the walls, the crowd thinned away to emptiness, and the long, dull stretch of the Appian Way before him, Pandone wearied. He loved the rush of movement, the burr of voices, the clang of feet, the imminence of warm walls. Here there was indeed the tramp of feet, but it was the rhythm of men on the march, not the ringing tramp of busy streets, and the open spaces daunted him; with a maimed farewell he turned his horse and galloped back to the comfortable narrowness of Rome, while Rivara, who loved Rome as Alessandro Pandone never could, rode on.

But not for long. A shrewd man and a sympathetic he saw how the strain tugged at Bianca's nerves now that the inevitable was upon her, and knew that the swift breaking of the last link would be a kindness.

"Signorina," he said abruptly, "I promised my help and it is yours whenever you ask it and at any cost. What lies before you I do not know, my doubt is if you know yourself, but it is either success in your purpose, whatever it may be, or Malazzorbo. For God's sake decide wisely. Say the word even now and I will see you safe to Malazzorbo, let His Eminence flame how he will—I could do no less for—for—the signorina's sake and your own."

But though there were tears in her eyes she only shook her head. "My cousin is fortunate. Signor Rivara, I am grateful but I must go south."

"Then I will put you into Crescenzo's care and ride back; a slow heart-break is a heart twice broken. And, signorina, we have this for our comfort—Crescenzo is an honourable gentleman."

Leaning aslant he held out his hand, and Bianca, taking it, held it for an instant. "I will not be afraid. Tell Emilia I shall see her within a month, but tell no one else." Then they trotted on to where Crescenzo rode by the side of his wife's litter.

Here the adieux were formal. After three minutes of courtesies Rivara, bare-headed, wheeled and galloped northwards while Bianca, riding slowly beside the litter, faced southwards, looking desolate and seeing nothing of the long, straight highway which seemed to stretch into infinity before her. Hers was not the first sore heart by many a thousand that had trod the Appian Way under foot, numb through its pain to the life of the moment.

Of a set purpose Ursula di Crescenzo left the girl to ride in silence. There are two main methods of aiding the bruised in spirit—one, to interpose changed thoughts

in order that Time may have leisure to apply his balm; the other, to leave nature to her own healing. This latter is the more heroic but the more sure since, at times, the first is little better than a narcotic whose effects pass, whereas the second has all the bracing of a victory won.

And without doubt Bianca's strong nature would have won her victory over the bitter sense of isolation and helplessness which beleaguered her, but a voice she knew broke in upon and aided the struggle while it was at its fiercest.

"His Excellency, the Count di Crescenzo?" said Alvano from behind the litter. "I am Luca Alvano, in the service of his Grace, the Emperor, and am returning to Capua. May I be allowed to join your train? The roads are none too safe for solitary travellers."

Crescenzo drew bridle, and at a sharp word the litter halted. "An Alvano of Gamerata?" he demanded. It was an important part of his business to know, and value with due proportion, the great families of the peninsula, north and south.

Alvano laughed. "The head of my race, Excellency, if that be any advantage."

"Then you are Alvano of the Arno ford?"

"Oh, Excellency, that is old history. Better than all these, my cousin, the Signorina Pandone, will vouch for me."

"By the Lord God," said Crescenzo heartily, "if you are Alvano of the Arno ford you need no vouching to me." Stooping, he looked into the litter. "Ursula, I present to you Signor Alvano of Gamerata—and the Arno ford!"

"And which is it to-day?" she answered, leaning forward, a smile in her shrewd eyes, "Gamerata or the Arno? Frankly, Signor Alvano, I prefer Gamerata."

"Oh, Countess, I have already told His Excellency that the Arno is ancient history and forgotten."

"Then the Church has a better memory than the Empire," she retorted. The light answer held a biting truth; Rome rarely forgave and never forgot. Then, as they all moved forward again a thought struck her, "Marco, tell Signorina Pandone the story of the Arno ford."

"No, Excellency, no; I protest," cried Alvano. "In times of peace war should be forgotten."

"There you are wrong," she answered, "war is always nearest when it is forgotten, and those who desire peace should remember." But she pressed the point no further, and turned to Bianca. "You knew your cousin in Rome?"

"We met twice."

"Um! twice is sometimes better than two hundred times! Did you know he was coming south?"

"No, signora."

"I see. Signor Alvano, this riding four abreast jolts the litter, and I am a selfish woman who loves her ease. Could you ride behind with your cousin?" Then, as they reined back, she said softly to Crescenzo: "Did you see how red she went? The young of the kind is always interesting."

"Young!" he echoed, "Alvano is no boy."

"All men are young at the beginning," she said, and glanced up at him under drooped lashes. "Are you so old, Marco?"

"Old? I? Not I! Why sweetheart, a woman keeps a man young, or makes him old before his time, just as she pleases."

"And so you see this Luca Alvano may be only a boy after all," she said, smiling up at him. "But it was the girl I had in my mind. Watch her, Marco—No! not now. For a Pope's ambassador you are dull at times; now is the time not to watch her, but watch her in Capua. She may get to the heart of truth while you are still arms-length off in the dark. It is my belief she knows all about

the Arno ford by this time, if not, she is a greater fool and less curious than I take her to be."

"So that is why the litter jolted, and you loved your selfish ease, all of a sudden?" said Crescenzo, laughing.

"Ah, the poor souls!" Her eyes went dim and few who did not know her very well would have recognised the great lady whose caustic tongue won a wide respect but little affection. "Love is the greatest thing in the world, Marco! She only saw him twice but her heart was breaking because she thought she had left him behind! And he, who had only seen her twice, said nothing but followed her in secret," which shows that a knowledge of the great world does not bring omniscience, nor make plain the secrets of a man and a maid. Bianca had had no thought at all of Alvano, and he but used her as a pretext for thrusting himself upon Crescenzo in the interests of the Emperor, his master.

But in one thing Ursula di Crescenzo was right. Bianca knew as much of the story of the Arno ford as she could draw from Alvano; later she heard it more fully from Crescenzo himself. And yet again the woman of the world was in error. It was neither curiosity nor interest, but a nervous desire to cover the awkwardness of the moment, that prompted the question.

"And what is this Arno ford they talk about, Signor Alvano?"

"Signor Alvano!" he echoed, fencing the question. "Are we not cousins?"

"So little cousins that I know nothing of the Arno ford."

"So much cousins that I might presume to tell you the story; one does not talk of such things to strangers."

"Such things! What things?"

"Things that Luca can tell Bianca and Bianca Luca, but which Signor This does not talk of to Signorina That."

In spite of herself she laughed, as he meant she should. "I think you are very good."

"That proves the cousinship," he declared. "You have dared to say what the world only thinks! And what are cousins and such-like for but to tell us truths? Only I do not know that they always tell it so pleasantly. Mostly our friends' truths are like the medicine of the apothecary, wholesome if bitter."

"Then what was this Arno ford, Signor Luca?"

"No, no. Not that! That, or rather its counterpart, is what your maid says to you—Signorina Bianca!"

"How do you know I have a maid?"

He turned upon her in a sudden white passion, all the playful banter by which he sought to set her at her ease gone from his face. "Do you mean Pandone has dared to send you amongst strangers——"

"No," she broke in hastily, "I have a maid, she is behind with the Countess' women. And, do you know, I think I am more afraid of her than I am of the Countess!"

"Did His Eminence choose her? His Eminence understands women better than men, I think. Tell me about her."

"No, tell me about the Arno ford, Cousin Luca."

"That is better," he answered, slipping once more into banter, "but the cousin is redundant. If I were not a cousin you would not call me Luca, hence there is no need to express it in words. The Arno ford? That was nothing; war might bring the like to any man. His Excellency was on one side, I on the other——"

"Of the river?" she interrupted.

He laughed. "Yes, and worse. He fought for the Lombards, I for the Emperor. It was just that he wished to cross the ford and I thought not! As I held the bank I had my way of it, that is all."

"All?" she echoed, disappointed. "Were the numbers equal?"

"Sufficiently," he answered carelessly. "Besides, it is always easier to defend than attack. And now question for question: Why are you going south?" Pandone, it may be remembered, had given him a reason, but neither at the time nor later had Alvano thought it entirely adequate.

"I hope to see my cousins," she answered briefly.

"Your cousins?"

"Yes."

"In Capua?"

"Yes."

For a moment Alvano made no reply but sat looking straight before him thinking rapidly. This was not the Cardinal's reason but it trenched upon it. Then he said very quietly: "Is it Pandone's mistake or yours? We have no cousins in Capua."

"None in Capua?" Her quick wit saw the danger that threatened to tumble the fabric of pretence into ruins before ever it was made use of. "Where, then?"

"In Gamerata and Nicastro."

"Then I must go on to Gamerata or Nicastro after I have rested in Capua." Her voice was firm, but Alvano, glancing aside, saw that a pallor had crept into her face. Instantly he threw off his gravity.

"Cousins," he scoffed, "Capua is worth all the cousins in the world—except, of course, the one who will share the Capuan days with you! Capua is the warm heart of Sicily, Capua is the centre and core of a nation's life, Capua is the East in the West, Capua is—Capua!" and thenceforward he kept up a stream of gay nothings, while in the depths of his mind he asked why the grey old wolf and that fox Pandone were driving this girl from Rome?

CHAPTER XVII

THROUGH THE PATRIMONY OF PETER

HAVING skirted the Alban lake they camped that night upon the upper waters of a small stream beyond Velletri. With their guard of infantry four-score strong, their handful of horse soldiery, their train of servants, both men and women, to represent camp followers, and their line of baggage-waggon, their march was like that of an army in miniature. Nor was there any slackness of discipline; watches were set, sentinels posted, and throughout the night patrols kept the camp clear of prowlers: Bianca sharing a tent with Ursula di Crescenzo, might have slept as securely as in Rome.

And there was need for the patrol. As they rode out next morning, with the tent already struck and sent forward on mule-back under guard to be in readiness at the night's halting-ground, Alvano bade Bianca not turn to the left. Promptly, in the perversity of nature, she turned that way and went white to the lips.

"Oh, Luca, Luca, what does it mean?" she cried, a catch in her voice.

"Thieves," he answered briefly. "Crescenzo has a heavy hand and a grim justice. Velletri might have done its own ugly work," and he, too, turned where three wisps of humanity hung from as many triangles. With every puff of wind they swayed, with every fresher puff they swang and danced, grotesque, horrible and unutterably piteous. "Not that I blame Crescenzo, nor must you hold it against him," he added hastily. "It is ghastly, and yet but for

this sharp lesson the whole camp might be looted to-night. Such things spread like a plague unless stamped out."

"Oh," she wailed, shaken and dismayed, "if it be like this now, under the hand of the Church, what will it be under your dreadful Emperor!"

"Ride on, cousin, ride on," he answered brusquely. "You will find no wayside thieves in Sicily. In Rome they tell strange lies against His Highness, but if they told the truth they would own he has brought peace to the nation and made the highway safe."

"By hanging three times three and for less cause, I make no doubt," she retorted, and drawing rein, held back that she might ride alone.

Alvano shrugged his shoulders and kept his place. It was, he supposed, a woman's logic to fall foul of the Emperor for Crescenzo's fault, which, indeed, was no fault at all, but all the same it disappointed him. The little he had seen of Bianca Pandone had taught him to expect a wider tolerance, a broader grasp of mind. The weakness of a woman, he told himself, was that she could never look beyond her immediate pity or blame, and so missed the greater world-wide issues the nearness of these hid from her. But even while he measured Bianca against his standard of womanhood, and found her wanting, he heard the faster trot of her horse as she ranged up in her old place beside him.

"I am sorry, Cousin Luca," she said repentantly, "Signor Rivara warned me against my tongue. And this time I was twice a fool: I know nothing of these things and have no cause to love the soldiers of the Church. But it galled me to see that horror just for thieving, when it may be that those who hung the poor souls are unspeakably worse," and in few words she repeated the story she had told Rivara in the kitchen at Malazzorbo. She spoke with greater restraint, but the ingrained bitterness would take

no denial, and as she flamed out against the Pope "who would permit such vileness and yet call himself Christ's Vicar" Alvano, his own blood seething hotly as he understood, told himself that here was one who could have no love for the grey wolf, Gregory.

On breaking camp they had marched northeast to skirt the foot-hills of the Volscian mountains, then turned south along the falling valley of the Sacco, with Segni on the right and Anagni, the cradle of Gregory's race and the chosen of the Papacy when Roman heat, whether of August or the unstable populace, grew to danger point, perched grey and remote upon their left.

At all times Alvano was the good comrade, gay without folly, sober without heaviness, as the mood or the talk of the moment demanded. With every hour Bianca's heart lightened, though every hour saw her further from Rome and nearer the uncertainties forced upon her by Pandone's schemes of ambition. All the depression, the grievous sense of isolation which had leaguered her the previous day had disappeared, and their rout was Alvano's doing. Very gratefully, if entirely silently, she acknowledged her debt, and then flushed till her scalp prickled at the remembrance of a half malicious, wholly laughing jest of Emilia's as to how a woman should reward a paladin who rescued her three times.

And Luca Alvano had come three times to her help when help was most needed—in the *atrium*, on the day of the procession and yesterday. Nor was the last any less a rescue because she was saved solely from her own fears. No man, and still more, no woman, can have a crueller enemy than his own terrors of the spirit. But Emilia's suggestion of what the reward should be was shameful, and to Alvano's astonishment, and not a little to his piqueing, she suddenly rode forward to join Ursula di Crescenzo, nor would she quit the side of the litter all that day.

Again disappointment chilled him, but this time with a personal sense of vexation. In her telling of the tragedy of Malazzorbo, no new tragedy to his experience nor the experience of any man who had seen war, she had become again the woman of his imagination, deep-natured, strong of spirit, tender, pitiful, frank, thinking no evil but flaming hotly against the wrong, and then at a whim she had hardly a yes or a no to fling at him. That her tongue was not cured of its sharpness he learned later.

They camped that night not far to the west of Ferentino, with the sun-baked walls of the little ancient city plainly within sight. Bianca, that she might the better satisfy her curiosity, had climbed a boulder upon a small hillock and was keenly scanning the town when Alvano joined her.

The scarf she had worn all day bound round her head had been discarded, and the cool, crisp wind, blowing from the sea across Monte Malaina, worked its will unhindered on the loops and braids of her hair, fluttering them into a halo which the last of the sunset set ablaze with brown-red fire. Her poise, as she stood with one hand brushing back the stray tangles from her forehead, threw the lines and curves of her well-knit, upright, muscular young figure into a statuesque relief, but though she heard him coming and knew his footstep she made no sign that she heard.

"Ferentino," he said, banally enough, "Ferentino, where Honorius and the Emperor met four years ago."

"Was that the fourth, or only the third time he vowed himself to the Crusade?" she asked acidly.

"And he will keep the vow."

"When?"

"When the hour has come."

"Which hour? His own or the Church's?"

"Oh, the Church! the Church!" answered Alvano impatiently, "one would think at times the Church was God Himself the way it says: Thou shalt, and Thou shall not."

“And is it not true?”

“Perhaps, but not true of its members. The very year Honorius vowed Frederick to the Crusade in Ferentino his soldiers marched through Malazzorbo—was that God’s will?” and Bianca, unlearned in casuistry, had nothing to answer. Presently he propounded another question. “Which is a man’s first duty, that which lies nearest or furthest off? To his own people whom God has given him, or to the world at large?” And again, seeing this time where the question led her, Bianca made no reply.

For a time Alvano, too, was silent. She was not looking at him but at Ferentino, still clear in the sunshine though they by this time were in shadow, for the sun had slipped behind the hills. But it is doubtful if she saw the brown sweep of the walls, broken irregularly by towered gates, or the gilded spire of the cathedral where Pope and Emperor had met in anger and, as is fitting from such a place, parted in peace with expressions of mutual goodwill. At least, her eyes were misty, and the flexible, tender, strong mouth quivered with a hardly controlled trouble. The fret he did not understand woke warmly in Alvano what he thought was a sense of cousinship, or, it might be, that sense of chivalry which in any man was due to any woman.

“Come,” he said, holding out his hand to help her to the ground, “what have you to do with such things that they should vex you? But to-morrow we shall be in Sicily and perhaps you will understand my meaning. Do you know what the Emperor said once?—God cannot have seen our Sicily, if He had He would never have planted His chosen people in barren Judea! The Church holds it against him as blasphemy, but I think if the Church only knew how to laugh a little common folk would love it more.”

“Is Sicily so very beautiful?”

"Wait and see," he answered, but his voice shook as he spoke, shook and deepened as when the spirit of a man is mightily moved. Men sometimes so speak of a woman they love, sometimes of a mother who is dead. "Come," he said again, "let us live in God's world, which is the world of neither priest nor Emperor," and this time she laid her hand in his without hesitation.

Later she recognised more clearly how he had fenced her. Even her direct question had been turned aside by an evasion which revealed nothing, yet was not incompatible with the Emperor's good faith. Surely the very fencing justified the anxiety of Rome? And yet, perhaps because she felt she owed him a debt, perhaps for no reason acknowledged to herself, she did not greatly blame him for his fencing. After all, he was the Emperor's man, and, as he had put it while speaking of another, his duty was to what lay nearest: if a man be not true to bread and salt where may faithfulness be looked for? In any case, when they broke camp next morning and Ursula di Crescenzo curtly said she had private matters to talk over with her husband Bianca reined back alongside Alvano without either demur or hesitation.

Again he was the good comrade, the man of camps, courts and cities, drawing upon his broad experience of most varied life that a tedious day might lose its tedium. But always from the lighter side: if war was so much as touched upon it was because in some passing interlude the mask of comedy had for a moment hid the grim visage of its wrinkled front, so that pity and even despair must needs laugh.

Of the Arno ford he never spoke a word, nor did Bianca, though by this time she had heard how forty desperate men, under a leader who risked his life in a prodigality of recklessness at every danger-point, had held three hundred in check through a terrible half hour that turned the scale

of a campaign. What had astonished her was how Mark of Crescenzo had told the story of his defeat without bitterness or animosity: there was even admiration trenching on enthusiasm. It was another lesson in how men can look beyond the immediate narrow issues at the greatness which lies beyond—the greatness of a brave man's whole-souled devotion to his master's cause.

Now, as she rode slowly at his side, silent yet responsive, while he talked now of the life at Palermo—but with no mention of the Crusade—now of the great university the Emperor was building at Naples, of the developing of the country, the securing its commerce on firm foundations, of the co-ordination of laws and enforcing of justice, or, it might be of the cities of the north, Milan, Verona, Venice, or again of the pure Grecian art his master was cunningly grafting on the more formal, cruder art of Italy, Bianca told herself here was such a man as she had never before met. How could she? His kind did not grow in Malaz-zorbo: Rivara, perhaps, came near to the type. But Rivara, in a sense, was the man of passive knowledge; Luca Alvano the man who translated knowledge into action, the man who knew the living world where the need—must of life—drives men, drives them to greatness betimes, and betimes over the lip of the pit to the nethermost hell.

Between the two types there is no true kinship, and Bianca, warm-blooded, and with an eager crave for action in her heart, sensed and understood the difference. This, to her, was the higher. Then she remembered that she had counted Emilia as fortunate, and the flushing heat of the day before again prickled her to her scalp. But this time she did not ride forward; perhaps because two hours before Ursula di Crescenzo had had affairs to talk over with her husband, or it may be that she, too, like Alvano, felt the sense of cousinship.

The halt for dinner was beyond Frosinone. As an old

campaigner Marco di Crescenzo kept clear of cities: it is easier to march in through an open gate than to collect the men to march out again once they have spread themselves to their pleasures. It was a meal Bianca detested and was even beginning to dread. The table was usually set out under some convenient shade and prepared for six, places being provided for the Bishop of Arsoli, the clerical head of the embassy, and his chaplain.

Gregory's choice of an ambassador of peace was a strange one. Had he searched the hierarchy for a prelate more intolerant, more swollen with belief in the divine rights of his order, he might have sought long and vainly. From the first Alvano had been the object of his lordship's pleasant sarcasm, while towards Bianca he oscillated between his knowledge of the cousinship and the deference due to the niece of His Eminence, the Cardinal Archbishop of San Marco del Monte.

"How pleased your Emperor will be," he said smilingly to Alvano. "The hand from which he took the Cross endowed with all the power of the Church to bless—or curse!"

"Indifferently?" asked Alvano, also smiling.

"Indifferently—where there is need," answered the bishop. "But it will be good news we bring His Highness."

"No news," replied Alvano. "He has known the result of the election these five days."

"Ah!" smiled Arsoli, "it is only Rome that is in ignorance."

"So Rome is ignorant?" Alvano paused, as if pondering. "Then that would be why one, in the *atrium* on the day of election, called His Holiness a grey wolf."

Arsoli stiffened rigidly. "Rome said that?"

Alvano turned to Bianca, "You heard it in the *atrium*?" Then, as she bowed, turning aside to hide the smile in her

eyes, he went on gravely, "It was their ignorance, Lord Bishop; they did not know that he is just a very gentle-hearted, very learned, very worn old man, so desirous of peace that he sends you to represent him in Capua." With a significant shift of his shoulder, closing the discussion, he faced Crescenzo, "Signor, where do we camp to-night?"

"Near Pontecorvo," answered Crescenzo, and the tension slackened.

But later, as he rode side by side with Bianca, Alvano returned to the interchange.

"Do you blame me? A lie, you will say, since I put my own words into another's mouth; and yet, no lie, since Rome thinks as I do."

"You call him a wolf," she said slowly, her eyes bright with reminiscence, "to me, as he laid his hand on me in blessing, he seemed something more than man."

Alvano nodded comprehension. "Perhaps we are both right. Only, where does the beast end and the divine begin? For in men there are certainly the two, and in Gregory more definitely than in most. I do not decry him, far from it. Gregory is a great man, but so doubled up with the burden of his limitations that he cannot see clearly before him. His age? Oh, no. His age is a prop, not a burden. There is no decay of the intellect and his years force an added respect. The burden that crushes him is this firm conviction, the Church is the world and I am the Church! For him the eternal pillars are founded in the Pope's chair."

"And have you no burdens?" she asked, half laughing at his seriousness, "you and your Emperor?"

He looked at her a moment, then joined in her laughter, but only ruefully. "Burdens? God knows, yes; wait, and you will see them."

CHAPTER XVIII

STUPOR MUNDI

It was a little later, with Frosinone perhaps three hours behind, that Alvano suddenly clapped spurs to his horse and rode ahead at so brisk a trot that the plodding train of men-at-arms and horses marching at a foot's-pace was soon left behind. Surprised, but full of a growing belief what Luca Alvano did he did for a good reason, Bianca watched him disappear over a rising hummock thickly set with small timber, nor even then did she ride forward to join the litter.

Beyond the wooded rise the ground sloped down irregularly to a wide stream. The water was no great depth, for the current broke in noisy ripples crisply white over the stony bed. The banks were shelving and shallow, and on the further side Alvano waited at the ford's edge, his horse faced round to meet them.

While the van passed forward he sat silent and motionless, but bared his head as Crescenzo and the swaying litter topped the bank.

"In the name of my master, the Emperor, welcome to Sicily*," he said in a loud voice. "There is nothing His Grace desires more than the loving goodwill of our Holy Father, the Pope."

"And to speak that loving goodwill I am come," began Crescenzo; but from behind Arsoli cut in,

*The Kingdom of Sicily comprised not only the island of Sicily, but the Southern portion of the peninsula, approximately to the extent of about one-third.

"Let him give us deeds, not words, Signor Alvano. There was once a man who said, I go to work in the vineyard—but went not."

But Alvano ignored the intervention and turned to the Countess, still bareheaded, "Signora, nowhere in the world are wit and beauty more welcome than in Sicily."

"Why not add youth, Signor Alvano?" she who had lost her youth but retained a stately charm, asked half whimsically. "So this is the country of the great ogre, is it?"

"Oh, signora," he answered, laughing. "You must have been listening to fairy tales which not even those who tell them believe."

"Tales of fairies, rather," she retorted. "That is, if half the stories whispered in Rome be true. And now, since wit and beauty and youth are so welcome in Sicily go to your cousin and tell her so," and with a friendly nod she sank back in the litter.

But if Alvano did as he was bid it was not in so many words.

"Sicily, cousin." Only the two words, but they were spoken as when a man speaks devoutly of holy things.

"You love Sicily?" she said, quite conscious of the insufficiency of the answer.

"I am sacrificing my life for her."

The significance of the present tense escaped Bianca. "Is it a sacrifice to live for one's country?" she bantered.

Alvano hesitated. It might have been well if he had said, "Yes, if that life is the life of a priesthood for which the man has no vocation." But he did not, and perhaps could not, because of the explanations that would have been sought and were not his to give.

"To a man who is a man I can conceive that there are times when death might be easier than life," he answered soberly.

At a dawning significance in his eyes, a significance of which he was unconscious, she felt herself reddening under the tanning of sun and wind and therefore held to her banter. "And are you not a man who is a man, you who came to my help twice over——" There she paused, hesitating, as she remembered the third succouring and Emilia's jesting malice. To cover her confusion she reverted to her earlier banter. "And is the burden already on your back, now that you have crossed the border?"

"The burden of Empire never lifts, and there it is," he answered, pointing to a village of fifty houses clustered on the crest of a near-by slope. "That is the duty that lies nearest—to keep these safe, to give even the poorest of them some taste of the good of life; to secure the harvest to those who sow; to say to them, Sleep in peace when your day's labour is over—the Emperor watches."

"Watches? Watches against what?"

"Against the stronger neighbour; against——" he turned in his saddle, looking backwards the way they had come, "Against my lord of Arsoli and his like. Were you so safe in Malazzorbo that you need to be told?" And Bianca, remembering Giuseppi's many bitter complaints of how the strong ground the weak and the brutal oppressed the helpless, with no hope of justice done, held her peace: Malazzorbo had no need to be told; and yet Malazzorbo was in the Patrimony of Peter.

"Ten years ago," went on Alvano, eyes and voice alike grave, "every man in Sicily did as he listed or lusted to the full power of the evil spirit that was in him. Then Frederick said, I am as much the Emperor of hind and herd as of knight and noble, aye, and of priest also; who touches mine to their hurt touches me. So, little by little, safety and the leave to live in the good of life have grown up. To keep these secured to the people is the burden of Empire, and with Frederick in Palestine who shall shoulder the

weight?" And again Bianca was silent. This Emperor, whom she was in Sicily to cajole, was not altogether the Herod Pandone had called him.

Amongst what has been described as the camp-followers of Crescenzo's army were, as has been said, friars of both the newly-formed orders. With these Bianca Pandone came in contact from time to time, but to one only was she attracted. She had observed him first at her uncle's table, a Franciscan, whose gentle, eager face and sorrowful weakness of health, his troubled breathing, broken by a significant hollow cough, moved both her interest and pity.

Brother Cornelius, as she heard him called, had been one of the group of monks at the service in the Lateran, and later she had recognized him following, with painful difficulty, in the long train of the camp attendants. His cough showed clearly how the exertion fretted his strength, but when Bianca spoke to him he had neither request nor complaint to make, though when she procured him leave to ride on a baggage waggon his gratitude was unbounded.

At the mid-day halt he joined her, as he frequently did when it was unobtrusively possible.

"Sicily at last, sister?"

"Yes, and then?"

"Palestine, I hope." He looked wistfully at her, his eyes luminous, yet troubled. "But that cannot be till August, and this is only April! Four months of life, sister!"

"But you will grow stronger in Sicily."

"Thanks to our good brother, the sun." Drawing a long breath he shook the grey hood back upon his shoulders. "Yes, the air is sweet, but the air of Christ's birth-land will be sweeter still. Will the Crusade sail, sister?"

"God willing," she answered, puzzled how best to reply.

"But man sometimes says a No to the Yes of God, else there would be no sin in the world, and surely to hold back the Crusade will be a mortal sin?"

"But why do you ask me if the Crusade will sail?" she demanded.

"Signor Alvano must know," he answered, and waited, dumb as a patient dog.

It was a relief that then the trumpet sounded to reform, and put an end to his probing.

That night they lay at Pontecorvo, and next day, having threaded the passes of the hills to east and south, Crescenzo pitched his camp near Teano. Thence to Capua was such a short half-day's journey that by a forced march the city might have been entered over-night.

But Crescenzo was too wise a man of the world to throw away a point in the great game being played between the Church and the Emperor. Italians, especially those of the south, are impressionable, their hearts touched, at times, through eye or ear: to have slunk into the city under cover of darkness, dishevelled, hungry, weary from a long day's march, would give a very false idea of the Holy Father's dignity and power at the very time when these were in question.

Therefore, that morning, every spot of rust was scoured from the armour; every steel bit, cheek-buckle, stirrup iron, lance-head, polished till the sun burned on them in diamond sparks. The very curtains of the litter were renewed, silk brocade of the richest being substituted for the dusty linen, and Crescenzo himself sat his horse in such a magnificence of gold and silver, satin and silk, as Bianca would have supposed impossible even in a dream, had she not seen Gregory's procession pass on its way from Saint Peter's to the Lateran.

But notwithstanding the many preparations dew was still wet on the herbage when they broke camp. With the passage to the south of the hills a new season seemed suddenly to have opened, and to Bianca this early April day was like her memory of the Marches in June, the air

was so soft and balmy, the wild flowers so far pushed forward, the foliage so luxuriant in its vigour. If this was Sicily it was no wonder that Alvano loved his land so passionately, and that the Emperor clung to its seductive beauty even in the teeth of his three-fold oath.

It was plain that Alvano was familiar with every yard of the way. More than once he shortened the road by saving a detour, and when Bianca jested that it was as well for the Holy Father's peace of mind that he did not know the highways of the Patrimony of Peter as familiarly he laughed, and bade her remember that this was not the shortest way from Capua to Rome.

"And why did we not come by the shortest way?" she asked, as curious to hear his answer as to know the reason.

"Because of the protection of Velletri, Ferentino and Frosinone against prowling bandits! It is a wise Holy Father who knows his own children and runs no needless risks!"

But for the most part Alvano rode in silence, gravely occupied with troubled thoughts. Some men come to a conclusion in anticipation, and lay away the finding to be used when the need rises; others hold, as it were, their knowledge in solution, waiting till the last moment for the crystals of decision to form. Alvano was of these latter, and with every one of these last leagues conviction grew that the deductions he would have to lay before his master were bad for the peace of Sicily.

Very carefully he tested them over and over again, as a man, knowing his life depends upon it, tests his armour before battle, but always they rang the same note—Gregory's arrogant insistence on the immeasurable power of the Popedom, an insistence which claimed not only the keys of the world which shall be, but also a dominance, temporal and spiritual, over the world which now is. To such a

claim the Emperor must say a plain No! driven thereto not only by force of character but also by force of policy.

So preoccupied was Alvano that he failed to hear the baying of dogs from a hunting-party in the distance, and only Bianca's persistent curiosity roused him. Peasants at work early in the fields, or a few travelling merchants with their laden pack-horses, had been all she had so far seen of life in Sicily: here was promise of a greater interest. He looked at her confusedly for an instant, before following with his gaze the gesture of her arm as she questioned him, then his lethargy broke up in hot excitement, and crying an incoherency he drove his horse at a gallop across the intervening open country.

At his evident emotion Bianca's curiosity deepened into alert, expectant watchfulness as she followed his headlong course. There were eight or ten horsemen in the group and at Alvano's reckless approach two pushed to the front while the rest halted. But almost immediately he was recognized, and with their doubts removed those in advance drew back, turning their horses in at the rear.

And a headlong approach it was, the dashing gallop of an expert rider who trusts himself and his horse alike with a perfect confidence in the sureness of foot and skill of hand. Over bush or boulder he leaped; where the obstacle was too high he swerved, where it was thin and light he crashed through. To Bianca it was a revelation in horsemanship, and its calculated recklessness suggested the Luca Alvano of Arno ford. To her astonishment she was conscious of a tremor, or something more than a tremor, of fear.

While still forty yards from the waiting group Alvano checked his horse to a slow trot and bared his head. The act startled Bianca with all the surprise of a shock, and a tingling thrill swept her as she recognized its significance. Before whom in all Sicily would Luca Alvano sit his horse

so humbly? The answer trod on the question's heels—the Emperor, and the Emperor only.

No patrol, trotting unconcernedly along a country by-way, and finding itself suddenly in touch with the enemy, could have more vital cause for debate. What shall it do—flee or fight? Even then there was always Malazzorbo. For an instant she watched, tense and uncertain, her pulses leaping as the heart-beat quickened in the conflict of doubt; then with a rapid sweep of the hand she unfolded the scarf-like wimple from her hair, twisted it round the horn of her riding-chair, shook her head to free the cramped braids and rode forward to join the litter. Already Alvano was trotting slowly back towards them, but not alone, and he rode with his head bared.

Crescenzo turned enquiringly to the girl as she joined the litter.

“The Emperor,” she said, answering the dumb question.

“The Emperor! Are you sure?”

“Would Luca ride cap in hand at the knee of any other man? Yes, it is certainly the Emperor.”

“Luca!” said Ursula di Crescenzo. “But why not, since you came to Sicily to find cousins! And do you always ride bare-headed in the sun?”

“It is hot,” answered Bianca, but though the red in her cheeks gave colour to the reply her eyes did not flinch. She had come to a decision: her hair was an added glory, and she knew it.

“H’m, best keep the heat out of your blood lest it scorch you. What do you think, Marco; is it the ogre?” But Crescenzo made no reply: Alvano, still uncovered, was riding forward alone.

“His Grace!” he called out while still ten yards away.

The entire train was halted, and all eyes, both from front and rear, were turned on the solitary horseman riding at a foot pace to join Alvano, and their curiosity was justi-

fied. Here was the greatest layman in Italy, the man of the hour, pre-eminent in rank, power, intellect and political comprehension: according to a contemporary chronicler, and that chronicler a churchman, he was the wonder of the world. To Gregory he was more—he was the spectre of progress and liberty of thought.

What they saw was a man of medium height who sat his horse as if he and it were one. Deep-chested and broad of shoulder for his inches Frederick gave every sign of great physical strength, but it was the grace and power of well-steeled muscles trained to perfect health rather than the brawn of huge thews. His ruddy, comely face was smooth-shaven, the crisp, close-clipped curling hair fair almost to redness, the grey eyes full, clear and keen, the nose and chin large and prominent, the lips round and fleshy: not a handsome face, not a beauty face, but a face women would look at twice, and men, who understand men, more than twice. He was dressed in the one colour throughout—hose, trunks and doublet, even to the silk cap, were of a warm russet: a gold chain round the neck and another wound through the folds of his cap were his sole jewellery.

“Your highness,” went on Alvano as Frederick rode level with his bridle, “I present to you His Excellency, the Count di Crescenzo, who is in Sicily on the part of His Holiness, Pope Gregory the Ninth.”

“A sorrow and a gladness,” answered Frederick, acknowledging Crescenzo’s deep reverence. His voice was strong, rich and smooth, as became his depth of chest and full, rounded throat. “Honorius was a true Father in God to my young manhood, and from my heart I mourn his death. But while the Church weeps for his loss she must rejoice that the Divine power has given her in his place a Head full of such ripe wisdom. For me, though death has robbed me I doubt not I have still a friend and father.”

“It is so to assure Your Grace that I am in Sicily,”

replied Crescenzo, bonnet in hand. But Arsoli, who had joined the group, struck in.

"A father, yes; but at times it is the duty of a father to admonish."

Frederick's only reply was a glance of enquiry at Alvano.

"His Grandeur, the Lord Bishop of Arsoli."

"Ah!" said Frederick, "I thought the voice was the voice of Jacob." He turned to Crescenzo. "Your Excellency, your formal message must wait a reception worthy its dignity. Meanwhile, I see you are not alone."

"No, Your Highness. Have I permission to present the Countess di Crescenzo?"

Instantly the Emperor uncovered. "Countess, your honoured husband brings a double welcome. And is the signorina your sister? What is the text, Lord Bishop? How beautiful are those who bring good tidings of peace."

"How beautiful are the feet, runs the text," answered Arsoli sourly.

A gleam of humour lit Frederick's grey eyes as he glanced at the stirrups of Bianca's riding-chair. "I were a heretic to dispute the correction with Your Grandeur."

"The Signorina Pandone is my cousin, Your Grace."

The sourness in Alvano's voice was almost as acid as that of the churchman, but Frederick did not so much as glance aside.

"Your cousin? Then, signorina, you are half Sicilian, and so already half my friend; may the half become the whole before April is much older. Countess, Capua is not Rome, but in our barbaric fashion we shall try to make you forget Rome; Your Excellency, next to a tried friend an honourable enemy has my sincerest welcome and warmest regard; Your Grandeur, as I have said, Capua is not Rome. Now I must go back to my wolf-hunting to keep myself in trim for hunting the fiercer beast later on: Alvano will see to your comfort in the palace," and with

a gesture that was at once a salute and a farewell he turned his horse and rode back to the group waiting him on the further hillside.

In less than an hour they reached their journey's end, but even at the sight of Capua, a town of towers and palaces set in a girdle of splendid woods, Alvano's sour mood failed to lift.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CUNNING OF EVE

WHATEVER value lay in Crescenzo's carefully arranged pageant of arrival he gained to the full. It was in the short interval of idleness which precedes the mid-day meal that the head of the little column, marching in close order, passed the gates, and all Capua flocked to the doors and windows to see the bravery.

It was Bianca's first experience of a Sicilian town, and, apart from the frank contrasts with Rome and the Marches, a more subtle difference thrust itself upon her. At such a spectacle, and upon such an occasion, Rome would have shouted itself hoarse with enthusiasm, or howled curses as the mood seized it, but none, not even Crescenzo with all his experience, could have told whether eyes of welcome or disfavour peered through the veil of Capua's silence.

And yet the Italians of the South were said to be an emotional people.

As to the city itself, contrasts and distinctions were, so to say, flung in Bianca's face at every step—the warmth of colour, the grace of art, the almost glittering freshness of stone and marble, the lesser height of the houses, seeming still lower from the wider-flung breadth of street, were all novelties. But whether these and other distinctions were inherent in the South, or the gift of Capua's newness as compared with the grey antiquity of Rome, she could not guess; Rome was from the very birth of the ages, Capua a growth of the latest century.

By Alvano's instructions they were lodged in the left wing of the palace, Bianca being allotted apartments

adjoining the more elaborate set of rooms assigned to the head of the embassy. But though simple by comparison with Crescenzo's housing they were as far an advance upon her knowledge of Rome in beauty of appointment and luxury of comfort as Rome had been beyond Malazzorbo. There were broad, soft couches suggestive of an Eastern divan; silken hangings whose quiet, restful hues called to repose; silver lamps of Grecian design, severely simple; deep-piled rugs from Persia on a floor of many differing woods and a great bed draped in white lawn overhung by thin curtains. Opening from the main apartment was a small retiring-room, or oratory, upon the one side, and upon the other the sleeping chamber of her maid.

Because of the hour of their arrival they dined for that day in Crescenzo's private apartments, and rested through the afternoon in anticipation of the Embassy's formal reception by the Emperor prior to supper. It was then that Bianca had her first effective lesson in the art whose rudiments Satan must have whispered into Eve's ears in paradise, for the luring of mankind through all the generations.

Asking no instructions Agata, her maid, a woman old enough to know that she was no longer young, and young enough to regret that she grew old, though still comely with a fleshy comeliness, chose a robe of thin sea-green silk for her mistress. As it lay heaped upon a couch it resembled chaos, formless and void, though divine in the making, but as the quick fingers set their skill to work, looping, folding, trussing, swathing, draping, and at times undraping, chaos took unto itself a soul, such a soul as Bianca loving dearly her old laces of Malazzorbo, had never dreamed the art of tissue and cunning embroidery possessed. And while Agata worked she talked.

"A beautiful country, signorina; so different from the cold of the Marches. Why, it can never be winter here."

"Why the Marches?" asked Bianca.

"Because Jacopo, at the Pandone palace, told me you came from the Marches, signorina. From Malazzorbo, he said. I think he called it a village. Would you please to raise your arm. What a beautiful arm you have, signorina; so smooth and rounded: it is a sin against nature to hide it in this long sleeve. But if you lift your hand to your head, so, the laces will slip to the elbow. I've heard it said that His Highness knows beauty when he sees it. And he does not see it in the Empress—a raw child scarcely seventeen, and he a man nearly twice her age! Yes, Malazzorbo, Jacopo said; but perhaps he was wrong?"

"No," said Bianca dully, "it was Malazzorbo."

Agata nodded her comely head comprehensively, almost with a little sympathy. "Malazzorbo? Now, after Capua who would wish to go back to Malazzorbo! Signorina, I will catch in the folds of the gown a little at the back. I know it is the present fashion to have it fall in a sweep from the throat to the knees, but by God's Grace there are some who can say No to fashion and profit by it: you, signorina, for one. The catching in at the waist behind will throw into relief——"

"No!" cried Bianca passionately, "no, no: I will not have it like that."

"There, signorina, there," said the maid soothingly, "it is done and it looks beautiful: you can see that for yourself. The Empress, as I say, is a raw child."

"The Empress? This is the second time you have spoken to me of the Empress: the Empress is nothing to me."

"No, signorina, no, of course not: Signor Alvano will be quite of your mind."

"Signor Alvano? What do you mean by Signor Alvano?"

"Chut! chut!" and Agata clicked her tongue tolerantly, her busy fingers never slacking in their work of creation.

"Do you take us for fools, signorina? Have we had no eyes these last four days! Do not forget how the sleeve slips down to the elbow, a touch of the fingers at the hair will do it. The good God does not give a woman beauty just that she should misuse it in a sleeve! Signor Alvano, I am sure——"

"Signor Alvano is nothing to me," broke in Bianca, too exasperated to notice how closely she kept to her form of words.

"No, signorina, they never are anything until, all of a sudden, we find they are everything in the world. His Highness, the Emperor, is a proper figure of a man, and they say that where he trusts at all he trusts altogether. And I can well believe it; one sees it in his face. A handsome face I call it, the face of a man any woman might trust—stoop, signorina, if you please, till I fix your head-gear; you are so tall! I always think that men who are men, and not mere court popinjays, like women to be tall—don't move, signorina, don't move, just a moment and—there! If there's a Sicilian of them all to stand beside you I'm a fool; this wall-mirror be my judge!"

If the sheet of polished steel, framed in a border of Oriental design, did not cast as brilliantly clear a reflection as the glass hand-mirror backed by silver, just coming into vogue among women of fashion, it served its purpose sufficiently well. Bianca certainly had never seen a mirror at once so large and so perfect: the drawing aside the curtain which helped to preserve it from tarnish was a revelation, and she would have been more or less a woman if, for the moment, she had not forgotten all else but herself. Indeed, it is to be doubted if any woman in health, and short of an age impossible to fix accurately, is ever displeased at what her glass tells her.

This is what she saw. A figure straight and tall that bore itself with the grace of carriage which youth possesses

of divine right and middle age sometimes borrows: soft, neutral-coloured silk rose in a ruffled collar to the chin and fell with a curving sweep to the waist, where a buckle at the back cunningly controlled the folds; then it descended amply to just below the instep, showing the feet clear, while behind it trailed in a spreading train; the waist was girded by neither scarf nor belt. The sleeves were long, bell-mouthed and pendulous, falling in the front with a waved edge below the waist, as her arms hung by her sides, and at the back dipping almost to the floor. Upon her head had been set transversely a stiffened shape of wire and silk some twenty inches long, and of the breadth of a dinner plate where it sat upon the coiled hair, but tapering to four inches wide at the ends. Over this a scarf of the light sea-green silk was loosely stretched, the loose ends being caught under the chin in a soft bow. From the irregular diamond thus formed a very lovely face looked out, the warmth of its colouring heightened by excitement and in admirable contrast to the carefully chosen setting, dull, yet neither heavy nor repellent.

“No jewels and no gold,” said the handmaid, standing critically by, but with the approval of the successful artist in her eyes. “It isn’t that we have not got them: His Eminence has been most generous: but I know men, and so for to-night I say, no jewellery. There will be gold and gems and glitter enough; you, signorina, will look better as you are.” She paused, considering, her under lip pushed out; then, “Signorina, brush the hair from your forehead. Ah!” and she struck her palms softly together as the loose sleeve slipped back, leaving the rounded, shapely arm bare to beyond the elbow, “What did I tell you! Signorina Bianca, do not forget that stray lock—even when it is not there.”

It was then the door opened and Bianca turned to find Ursula di Crescenzo. For a moment the Roman dame

looked her ward up and down with understanding, critical eyes, noting the pose and how the warmer flush of the face made effective its striking contrast with the neutral setting; then she turned to the tire-woman.

"How did you come into the signorina's service?"

"Through His Eminence, Excellency."

"And how to His Eminence?"

"His Eminence, Cardinal Montelengo——"

"I see. His Eminence is the ape of the Church. Let there be no ape's tricks here or you go packing back to Rome; you hear?"

She spoke as calmly and in as level a voice as if she had said, His Eminence, Cardinal Montelengo, is an anchorite who starves his penitents, and I will not have it. But the significance was unmistakable, and Bianca, disturbed and troubled, stammered out,

"Signorina, is all not right—am I not——"

"You are perfect, child, perhaps just a shade too perfect. Had I a daughter I could desire nothing simpler—nor more likely to attract a husband!" By this time they were in the corridor, the door closed behind them, and were turning into the Countess's own apartments. "The sting is that the woman is of Montelengo's choosing, and Montelengo ——" she broke off with a shrug. "Tell me, was Signor Alvano a close friend of your uncle's?"

"No, signora. I think he only saw my cousin twice, and then formally."

"Then that's not the reason. And, if I am a judge, it would be waste. Your cousin is to introduce us to the court: Crescenzo and that kite in dove's feathers, Arsoli, will follow—they have forms and ceremonies to go through, and, for my part, I like them. They have their uses. They are the tags and tinsel which cover ugly truths into decency."

"Like dove's plumes on a kite," said Bianca.

But Ursula di Crescenzo had no laugh for the jest. "Eagles can borrow dove's plumes as easily as kites," she said, with a sudden return to her vexed humour. "I do not like that woman of Montelengo's choosing," and it was a relief when a lackey announced Alvano.

But not the Alvano of the *atrium* or the route from Rome: all was changed except the frank, handsome face and easy, gallant bearing of the man; these, being of his essence, were unalterable. Because of the mourning for Honorius Bianca had seen nothing of the more splendid side of the capital of Christendom, and Alvano, in his ceremonial dress of slashed silks and velvets trimmed with fur, his pointed silken shoes, his sash of gold brocade and chains of gold, his belt of embossed leather, his short-bladed sword, the hilt damascened and inlaid, was a new figure in her new world. At the first glance she thought she preferred him as in the *atrium*, but after the second she was not so sure. Quite involuntarily she put up a hand to brush away from the temple the stray lock which was not there; then, as the loose sleeve slipped beyond the elbow and his eyes met hers, she remembered Agata's advice and flushed furiously.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE COURT OF THE EMPEROR

ONCE within the great hall of the palace, and upon the outer fringe of the crowd thronging its floor, Bianca understood Agata's worldly wisdom in leaving both gems and ornament aside. In an aviary of birds of paradise the brown hedge sparrow is more notable than the goldfinch. Ursula di Crescenzo, magnificent in gold brocade, and hung with the jewels of the Crescenzi and Gaetani of many generations, could more than hold her own even in Capua, but not Bianca Pandone, and when to out-vie is impossible there is much to be said for the power of contrast. The first essential of successful advertisement is to draw the eye.

The court of Frederick, Roman Emperor and King of both Sicily and Jerusalem, was without a rival in the western world, nor even in troubled Byzantium could its brilliance be paralleled. In France Louis IX was but a child; Spain was still the cock-pit of petty antagonisms, Leon, Galicia, Castile, Arragon, with the Moors dominant in the South; in England Henry III, a weak lad of twenty, reigned over a nation in the making, and a land exhausted by war and the rapacity of the Church exercised through John Lackland; Italy was a kennel of snarling dogs, where each alternately fought, or fawned upon, his neighbour.

According to one of those forms which the Countess declared had its uses she and Bianca were assumed not to exist until they had been received by the Emperor, a ceremony which must be preceded by Crescenzo's announcement of his mission. Therefore for the moment they were

in, but not of, this world which pulsed and throbbed about them, a fiction which did not prevent the many curious eyes from noting the set of their every tag or bow or ribbon. That was human nature—Capua might be the seat of empire for the moment, but Rome was eternal, the mistress of the world, and here were Romans not five days from the newest fashions and follies of the mother city.

Alvano led them to a broad embrasure set round with carved stone seats covered by cushions of down, the whole raised two steps above the level of the floor. There were others like it in the huge hall, but it alone was vacant; without doubt their privacy had been pre-arranged. To Bianca it was a wonderland and Ursula di Crescenzo, accustomed though she was to the courts of the many rulers in Italy, courts of culture and refinement, would have quoted the Queen of Sheba, The half was not told me, but for one reason—she had never so much as heard of her existence, and was even a little doubtful whether or not Suleiman was a Saracen Emir.

For the length and breadth of the room the roof was low, and seemed yet lower through an ingenious arrangement of polished brass chains in a network supporting scores of lamps midway to the ceiling; if some were dark and some smoked, the firmanent was none the less a blaze of stars. From gilded brackets thrust out from the walls, huge candelabra raised their manifold arms, each a point of flame; between these, and above them, gods and heroes in glimmering white marble looked down their calm speculation from deep niches; raised on pedestals cressets of silver held bowls of aromatic gums, or perfumed woods, which smouldered out a sluggish, cloying sweetness on the air; between statue and candelabra, or candelabra and cresset, folds of ruby-crimson silk hid the harsher nakedness of the walls; a deep clerestory gave light by day.

There was no dais, but at one end of the hall two chairs

of carved stone were raised slightly above the level of the floor; for the moment these were unoccupied. At the further end, facing these thrones of state, a low gallery, semi-circular in shape and guarded by a stone balustrade, was pushed out from the wall. Here were musicians with flutes, citoles, dulcimers, trigons, playing softly light, rapidly-moving airs very different from the solemn Gregorian chants with which Bianca was familiar.

"The Emperor is not here?"

Alvano shook his head. "Not yet. If he were present there would be a lighted lamp on that sconce above the thrones. But though His Grace is absent the brain, bone and sinew of Sicily and the Empire are here. The measure of a State is the greatness of its men, and Sicily is no dwarf. Do you see that towering rock of a man with the grizzled beard? He is Herman of Salza, Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights; beyond him, in the purple vestments, his hand on a pedestal, is the Bishop of Ratisbon, further is my lord of Bamberg and there, across the floor, is the Bishop of Augsburg. If our friend Arsoli has aught to say, he must say it in the teeth of equal Church authority."

"Germany!" said the great lady in the tone of one who did not love Germans, and cared nothing who knew it. But Alvano only laughed.

"They are not all Germans. Look to your right, Excellency. That is His Grace the Archbishop of Reggio, as good an Italian as Arsoli."

"Yes," she answered, her eyes roaming over the moving throng with as frank a curiosity as any that stared into the embrasure, "but one may speak with the power of the Chair."

"Then God grant," he replied soberly, "that the others may answer with the divine authority of Justice."

"A threat?" she asked tranquilly.

"By no means, Excellency. In Sicily no one makes

threats but the Emperor, and nothing is further from his thoughts."

"Um," said she, "but what lies nearest his thoughts? That would be more interesting!" Suddenly she laid a hand on Alvano's slashed sleeve, and with the other pointed across the hall. "There, who is that?"

In the ebb and flow an aisle had opened, and in the vacant space, clear for an instant, stood the isolated figure of a man. From head to foot he was clad in black, the sole relief of colour a gold chain thrown in triple folds round his neck and falling in graduated loops upon his breast; from the lowest of these hung a medallion; had Ursula di Crescenzo been near enough, she would have seen it was a woman's face of delicate, spiritual beauty, the face of a saint-to-be. His head was bent, his lips moving as if in silent prayer or secret communion, oblivious of the crowd surrounding him; as he turned Bianca saw the symbol of the Crusade, the cross in blue, bound upon his arm. Then the aisle closed and he was hidden.

"I said the brain and strength of the Empire were here," answered Alvano, "that is its very soul. That is Lewis of Thuringia, husband to Elizabeth of Hungary, in whose lap bread for the poor turned to roses lest her charity should be blamed. That was in the Landgrave's unregenerate days; now——" He paused, his gaze passing from Ursula di Crescenzo to Bianca.

"Now?" repeated the Countess.

"Now it is said there is between them that perfect union which knows neither man nor woman, nothing but community in thought, aim and purpose."

"H'm, that is very well for saints, but in this life we are in the body! He wears the cross?"

"For the Crusade."

"So there truly is a Crusade!" she said satirically, "When will it sail?"

"His Holiness preaches faith but shows none himself," Alvano's tone was bitter. "Words, not deeds; precept, not example, that is the Church from cardinal to curate. Live chaste, says Montelengo! Have faith, says Gregory!"

"Yes," she persisted, "but a black in Rome does not make a white in Capua—when does it sail?"

"At the appointed time. And if you wish a white in Capua, there is one," and Alvano pointed where a man, whose snowy burnous was in sharp contrast to his dark skin and yet darker beard, walked apart. "That is Sheik Hussein, chief of the Arabs from Lucera."

"A Saracen and a Pagan!"

"A loyal subject to Sicily, together with hundreds of his faith and feeling. Will his Holiness claim next to decide who may, or who may not, serve the Empire?"

What the Countess, being a woman little given to fencing and most intolerant of being fenced, would have replied can only be guessed, for Bianca spoke for the first time, leaning forward and touching Alvano on the shoulder.

"Look!. The lamp is lit; the Emperor has come."

And now that they had leisure to notice they found that a change had swept across the thronged hall; the murmur of voices and pleasant ripple of laughter had died into silence, nor was there any longer an ebb and flow; in the gallery the music was subdued to a few quiet chords.

From her vantage height Bianca could see that the crowd was divided by an open laneway, beginning at an entrance underneath the gallery and extending in a direct line to the stone thrones; there the space debouched, leaving these widely isolated. Up this laneway, unpreceded by herald or seneschal, walked Frederick, a slender, pale-faced girl at his side.

"Yolande, the Empress," breathed Alvano.

Yolande the Empress! Agata's "raw child." In a sense she looked both as she passed on her way to the empty

thrones, a quadruple line of courtiers bowing at either side as corn bows and bends before the breeze. From their embrasure both women measured her, as women always will measure one of their sex who, for some reason, any reason, is put in opposition to them; nor, in such a case, is the judgment either a just or a considered one. How can it be, when the element of self warps it?

"H'm," said Ursula di Crescenzo, "Empress because she carried the crown of Jerusalem in her pocket."

"A raw child," said Bianca in her thoughts, and, all unconsciously, her hand went up to set in place the lock which was not awry.

It was at that moment that Frederick looked up. Hitherto he had spoken to no one but Yolande nor, following, no doubt, the custom of the court, had even appeared to see the living walls hedging them in. Now, deliberately, he scanned the embrasure. From the Countess, seated, his gaze passed quickly to Bianca, standing erect, her head thrown back, her face clear in the lamp-light, one arm bare to the elbow as her finger-tips moved gently underneath the braids of red-brown hair, and he half halted in his slow stride. But though recognition leaped to his eyes there was no outward sign of recognition; then he passed on and Bianca, turning, found Alvano watching her in troubled perplexity.

Behind the Emperor and Empress followed a short procession, headed by two of their suite of more than middle age.

"Raynald, Duke of Spoleto and the Duchess," said Alvano in his whispered voice. "Spoleto will be Regent while Frederick is in Palestine. Lewis of Thuringia, who follows them, you know; Bamberg you know; Egbert of Bamberg is uncle to Elizabeth, the Landgravine. Next is the Duke of Bavaria, in Sicily for the Crusade; the Bishop of Angers, in Sicily for the Crusade; Pier della Vigna."

"Who is Pier della Vigna?"

"A burgher of Capua and His Grace's right hand."

"In Rome they told us Luca Alvano was that!"

Alvano laughed. "An Emperor has need of more right hands than one."

"That he may climb the higher?"

"Pardon, Excellency," he answered, sobering, "but the Emperor is the Emperor; my master can climb no higher."

"But he may have need to cling! The greater the height the greater the fall!"

"A threat?" he asked, quoting his own words.

"By no means," she answered him out of his own mouth, then added, "Crescenzo is a friend."

"But Gregory an enemy! Countess, my master has truly need of many hands."

Ursula di Crescenzo relapsed into the terrible directness of speech at times characteristic of her, "H'm, an ape, like Montelengo!" On the whole she was not dissatisfied with the result of her probing. There would be a Crusade, else there was no need to name Spoleto Regent, but when would it sail?

With the Emperor and Empress seated, and their immediate attendants ranged in a curved line extending behind the thrones, the formalities which the Countess had spoken of began. Frederick raised his hand; instantly the music ceased in the gallery and a trumpet blared. While the echoes of its single call were still flying, a door at the lower end of the hall was opened and two pages entered. They were in the Imperial livery, and not Frederick himself had seemed more oblivious of the onlookers lining their approach. While still three paces distant from the thrones they went down upon their knees.

"An embassay from His Holiness, Pope Gregory the Ninth, your Highness."

"Admit them." Frederick's tone was curt, expression-

less, and so low-pitched that it scarcely reached the listeners in the embrasure.

Rising, the pages retired, and the quiet which had possessed the vast hall broke up in murmur, only to be silenced almost immediately by the return of the pages. Behind them walked Crescenzo, the bishop by his side, and a small retinue of officers following; Arsoli's chaplain was at his patron's heels.

Gregory and Rome had reason to be proud of their envoy, and Ursula di Crescenzo, wife and lover, hardened though she was to forms and pageants, found a dimness of smiling tears in her eyes as she watched the tall figure of her husband, bronzed of face, grizzled of beard, straight as a knight's lance, pass grave-mouthed through the curious onlookers, doubtful friends all, possible enemies most.

This time, not having the common folk to dazzle and impress, Crescenzo had eschewed all show in his dress, but on his heels were the gold spurs of his order, at his side the blazoned hilt of a sword of honour, and on his breast the badge of the Military Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. Arsoli, for his part, was clad in the most splendid robes his high office in the Church provided.

"Marco, the most noble Count of Crescenzo, Lord of Narnone, Pietrala and Sovanella, Knight of Saint John, Envoy Extraordinary of His Holiness, Pope Gregory the Ninth," cried the elder of the two pages in a clear voice; then they stepped one to each side and Crescenzo and Arsoli passed on between.

At the announcement Frederick had risen, and now, from the advantage of a shallow but broad step, looked down on the Romans. His open left hand rested on his hip, with the other he emphasized his words, southern fashion, though his voice was quiet to soberness.

"Gregory the Ninth!" he repeated. "The Lord has taken away and the Lord has given, blessed be the name of

the Lord! But I anticipate your pronouncement, Count Marco."

Crescenzo's voice was very clear and deliberate as he answered.

"It having pleased Almighty God to take unto Himself our Holy Father, Honorius, I am commissioned to inform your Grace that Ugolino Conti, Bishop of Ostia, Cardinal of San Eusebius, being called by the Spirit of God to the Headship of the Church has obeyed the divine command, humbly conscious of his own insufficiency for so great an office, but relying on the prayers of all faithful people for strength, comfort, support and wisdom in its maintenance. His Holiness has assumed the name and title of Gregory the Ninth, and in the fulness of his warm, paternal love has charged me to deliver this letter to your Grace, whom he hails as a dear and well-beloved, trusted son."

Drawing an oblong parchment from a pouch at his belt Crescenzo went down on one knee and presented it to the Emperor. Stooping, Frederick received it with both hands, turned it over so that the many seals were uppermost, kissed the impress of the Papal badge, the dove, upon them, and handed the letter to Pier della Vigna, who stood behind his throne. Della Vigna kissed it in turn with every evidence of profound respect, and opening his doublet laid the parchment against his breast then he stepped back.

"H'm!" said Ursula di Crescenzo, "if I know anything of Gregory that should scorch him to the bone!"

"The *Pax Vaticana*," said Alvano bitterly.

"What is that?"

"Peace, peace—when there is no peace!"

But the Emperor was speaking. "Lord Count, it is God's mercy to His Church and her glory that her lamp is unquenchable. Not even the shadows of death, which plunge our lower lives into darkness, can dim her radiance. From the relaxed hand of Honorius the Spirit of Life has

passed the torch of eternal truth to the firm grasp of Gregory, and to a Father in God a Father in God succeeds.

“For Honorius our grief is too raw for speech. All Sicily mourns for him with mourning Rome. But even in her grief she takes comfort when she remembers the learning, the lofty thought, the devout piety, the pure and noble spirit of him who now sits in Saint Peter’s chair. In the glorious galaxy of the Church Ugolino Conti has long shone as a brilliant star. To natural wisdom is added in him the ripe experience of age. Both, we are confident, will illumine the mind of His Holiness, revealing to his paternal heart the true and urgent needs of those who call him Father! As Vicar of the Prince of Peace the love of peace must be deep seated in his breast. Count di Crescenzo, you will assure His Holiness that nowhere in Christendom beats a warmer affection than in the heart of his children of Sicily. When we have read his gracious letter we shall reply in a fitting manner. Count Marco, and you, Lord Bishop, Sicily welcomes you with both hands. For myself, I count it gratefully as a sign of His Holiness’ favour that he has entrusted this mission to such honoured names.”

As Frederick ended Arsoli strode forward a step, his right hand raised. Most bitterly he resented the inferior position into which he found himself thrust. It was a slight not alone to himself but to the Church at large that a layman should take such precedence, and the dignity of both required that he should assert his office.

“Let it not be forgotten,” he said loudly, his voice harsh and rasping in his ill-suppressed passion, “that it is at all times the right and duty of a father to admonish—aye, and if need be to punish where there is slackness or disobedience.”

Instantly the hall was in an uproar, a clamour of angry voices rising even to the doors. With the one impulse Spoleto and the Duke of Bavaria broke the line that half

surrounded Frederick as if to avenge the insult to their Emperor. In the embrasure Alvano started forward, and but for Ursula di Crescenzo's restraining hand would have forced his way into the crowd packing ever more thickly round Arsoli.

But Frederick motioned for silence. "Do not press unduly on the guests of Sicily!" he cried; then, to Arsoli, "Do you speak that of yourself, Lord Bishop, or have you a special message of our Holy Father's love and affection to deliver?"

For a moment Arsoli hesitated. They were Gregory's own thoughts, Gregory's own words, but not spoken by Gregory's orders. For the threat of those about him, a threat naked and imminent, the bishop cared not a jot. His was the spirit that if need be could endure, as well as inflict, martyrdom; but Gregory might disavow his boldness as, possibly, premature. Therefore he temporized.

"All the world knows the duty of the Church."

"But the Emperor is not all the world," retorted Frederick, "he is only the most of it, or, if not he, then the Empire." Allowing no time for reply he turned to the Empress. "My heart, I commend to your high regard our good late enemy and better present friend, Count Mark of Crescenzo; of His Grandeur it ill befits me to speak who have been, but against my will, a man of war while he is a man of peace. Count Marco, I understand, has brought a second welcome with him; let us go together and find her."

Rising, Yolande—looking more than ever the raw girl—took the hand Frederick held out to her, and side by side, with Crescenzo at the Empress's left, they made their way to the embrasure. Of what followed Bianca retained no very clear recollection. That Frederick had spoken some courteous words of formal welcome she knew, also she knew that the Empress had spoken no welcome at all, only

stared at her with the large eyes of a curious, uncertain-tempered child; but whether she had replied, or how she had replied, was lost in the whirl of her confused brain, unaccustomed to such scenes.

When she came to herself she was one of the many guests on the floor of the great hall, Alvano was at her elbow, Crescenzo and the Empress two paces ahead of them following Frederick and the Countess: all were talking gaily except Yolande, who was dumb. Alvano was saying:

“Where did you learn perfection, Cousin Bianca? And if you still seek cousinships in Sicily, you will find scores claiming the privilege after to-night.”

“Perfection?” she repeated, glancing up into his face only to look down again as their eyes met, and add hastily, “Cousins! I think I have made an end of seeking cousins: there are times when my heart grows sick for Malazzorbo.”

A blare of trumpets announcing that the Emperor was served prevented Alvano from enquiring what she meant; nor, later, as he sat beside her at supper, with Frederick opposite and a row of notables to right and left, was enquiry possible. By those interested in such trivialities it was noted that the Emperor was as courteously condescending to the unknown girl who faced him across the table as to the wife of Gregory's ambassador, sitting at his right hand; nor this time, was Bianca confused in her replies.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SPLENDID DREAM

"I AM sick of shadows!" and Frederick made a wide southern gesture of protest with both arms as he halted in his impatient stride. "Luca, my friend, is there nothing real in this world of hollow pretences we are forced to live in?"

"The love of many tens of thousands who would gladly die——"

"Oh, do not think I doubt that! If I doubted the love of my people I would pray for the peace of Grandsire Barbarossa's unknown grave. But here is this leathern-hearted old man—d'you think, Alvano, that hearts wrinkle and shrivel with age as the cheeks do at times? If so, God keep me young! But here is this Gregory, not yet warm in Saint Peter's chair, speaking peace through the mouth of Crescenzo, while Arsoli——"

"Arsoli is no shadow!" said Alvano as Frederick paused.

"Nor is Crescenzo. Crescenzo is honest, Arsoli is honest, but this Gregory—you were in Rome, Luca; tell me what Rome thinks of its Pope."

It was the night of the banquet, and Alvano was alone with his Imperial master for the first time since his return to Capua. Frederick had prolonged his wolf hunt until late in the afternoon, then had come the arrangements for the reception of the Papal Embassy; now they were in the most secluded of the Emperor's private apartments, where none were admitted except those with whom he could throw aside the burden of greatness, and speak his thoughts freely as man to man.

Here there was no sign to be seen of the luxury the Emperor loved to surround himself with in his leisure hours, but if there was a Spartan plainness there was also something suggestive of the Greek in the classic and severe beauty of the appointments.

"What does Rome think?" repeated Alvano. "Your Grace, four-fifths of Rome never thinks for itself. Honorius dies, and Gregory, in Honorius's place, thinks shows, spectacles and largesse, and Rome shouts for him as it would shout itself hoarse for Pandone, Montelengo or Colonna, if they could think the same thoughts. Presently there will come a change. Gregory will think the thoughts of the grey old wolf he is, and some demagogue will think Rome has had enough of him; then Rome will shout for the demagogue."

"And the other fifth?"

"So much of it as is the Church says, We have a Pope of fourscore, let us look forward; as for the great families, they are afraid. But for Honorius Cardinal Ugolino Conti would have whipped them with whips, now Gregory may whip them with scorpions; or, if that is impossible, he may squeeze them as he would an orange, not for his own profit, but to the greater glory of the Church."

"And Frangipani waits quietly for his whipping?"

"For a price to be arranged Frangipani will transfer to Your Grace all his estates, all his strongholds in Rome, and receive them back again as a fief from the Empire."

"Frangipani will? Then by the Splendour of God, let Gregory see to it, that he lays no finger on a vassal of the Empire!" cried Frederick, the blood flushing his ruddy skin as with a glow of fire. "'The father to admonish—to punish if need be,' said Arsoli with a sneer that was a threat. Alvano, there is no room in Italy for two such men as Gregory and Frederick! The world has no such intolerance as the intolerance of arrogant old age fed

upon tradition! Admonish? Already he has presumed to admonish!"

"Then his letter——" began Alvano.

"Gall and honey smeared with a glove of steel, and even the honey had a sting in it! Admonish? Aye! He would admonish Sicily as Rome admonished Toulouse and England, stirring up insurrection that the Holy See might suck the fat of the land! But Gregory is fourscore, and the Church looks forward? Yes, and so must we. Gregory will pass, another will follow, and then in ten years the time will be ripe for you. You in Rome, I in Palermo! What shall we not make of our Italy—Lombardy, Venice, Florence, Milan, Romagna! The greatness of the first Caesars, and the culture of Greece! A United Kingdom splendid with the glory of a Golden Age! Alvano, Alvano, it will be the greatest thing in the world!"

But Alvano's enthusiasm did not kindle as it once had kindled at the splendid dream. His face, rather, was almost heavy with melancholy as he stood by the angle of the gaping fire place, now empty, looking not at Frederick but at the Persian rug beneath his feet.

"Frangipani says there never can be a Ghibeline Pope—a Pope who can support the Emperor."

"Frangipani does not understand. In ten years time, fifteen if necessary—in fifteen years you will be little more than forty, I not yet fifty; you will be Cardinal Alvano, the one man in the Conclave who can bring peace to both Rome and the Empire."

"It is your Highness who does not understand. Frangipani means that an Imperial Pope is a self-contradiction—a black-white; plainly, he means the Pope must always be the enemy of the Empire, their ideals and their ambitions are different."

"But not ours; we see eye to eye and are brother and brother." He paused, concern clouding his face, and laid

a hand on Alvano's shoulder. "Luca, what has changed you? A month ago you were all fire, now you are—no, not ice, but dead ash. And yet this was your own thought—that you should enter the Church and, backed in secret by all the forces of the Empire, rise to the Cardinalate, and then, skilfully setting faction against faction, interest against interest, climb to the highest seat of all that you and I, the Church and the Empire, working together, should bring peace and power to Italy, such peace and power as can only come by union. Is the dream less splendid than it was? The good to Italy less real? Luca, Luca, what has changed you—cooled you?"

Not even at the ring of passion, with its hint of pleading in the voice, did Alvano look up. "No change, Your Grace; but you have used the right word—it was all a dream. Frangipani——"

"There's more than a chance word from Frangipani in this!" Letting his hand fall to his side Frederick turned away, but halted abruptly. "I think I see what it is—Rome has daunted you, Rome with its thousand altars, Rome with its high religious mystery and pomp of solemn ceremonial. You have no vocation—I know your high nature, Alvano; Rome has taught you that to touch sacred things without vocation is to profane them: yes, I think I understand. Ah, my friend, be not religious overmuch! Vocation? Has Montelengo a vocation? Look out across the priesthood, north, south, east, west, how many vocations from the highest to the lowest? And all, Cardinal, bishop, presbyter or deacon, are where they are—for what? For bread or power, while you—Luca, Luca, I say again, be not righteous overmuch; you at least would live clean and judge righteous judgment; you would bring peace to your nation, peace to the world; you would raise brotherhood and love to their true place in the eyes of the people and draw the hearts of all men to the

Church. Does a man not serve God in serving his people? Fling away your doubts; for a scruple would you sacrifice Italy?"

Before Frederick ended the passion and the pleading had done their work. Alvano, his chin lifted, his eyes alight, his breath quickened, was quivering responsive as an æolian harp quivers responsive to the wind sweeping over its chords.

"Vocation? Surely the saving of a people, the building up of a nation, is vocation enough? Heart and soul I believe it! But there in Rome——" Being an honest man, too honest for an Emperor's right hand, he paused, and the light in his eyes dulled as he remembered not only Rome but Ferentino, and a woman's face with brown-red hair blown about its beauty by the cool wind across Monte Malaina. It meant more to him than he had thought. "I do not love priests," he ended lamely.

But this time the Emperor was not chilled to protestation; rather, a sympathetic note had been struck. Neither had Frederick any great love for priests, or, at least, not for priest-craft—which is a very different thing.

"I think I understand," he said for the second time. "But Luca Alvano is no Montelengo—if he were there would be an end to our dream. Women do not call aloud to you as they do to Montelengo, and since there is no one woman——?" He paused on the affirmative interrogation.

"No," said Alvano soberly, almost harshly, "no, there is no one woman."

"And with you it is only the one woman who could count. But you do not like the priesting? No! Nothing but a vocation or a great sorrow can justify the priesting of any man. For the present leave the priesting aside. If it were not for custom and prejudice I would say leave it aside altogether, since there is no law of the Church that a man must be a priest to be Pope. Yes, the priesting can

wait, nor is there need to speak at all of it. Let us talk of Rome. How did you pass your leisure?"

"Chiefly in the churches. A man does not need a vocation to be moved to awe in the churches of Rome. There was one above others. It is beyond the walls, Your Grace: they call it the Vigil Church. It is there, one of several, that postulants pass their last night before ordination—it moved me greatly."

"Um!" said Frederick, perplexed by this shift of thought, "what church was that?"

"San Tommaso, they call it."

"Um!" said Frederick again, "the apostle of doubt?"

Both fell silent. The one thought dominant in Frederick's mind was that in Rome Alvano had been flung sharply in contact with forces repellent to him, forces the Emperor did not pause to define clearly. It was enough that they had been found sufficiently repugnant to dull enthusiasm and compel doubt. In such a case to fence decision and gain time was essential—with time the impression born of the Roman atmosphere would weaken, with time and prejudice fanning the flame of enthusiasm, now flickering doubtfully, would blaze again as at the first: a generous sentiment might draw Luca Alvano, no spur would ever drive him.

Alvano's thoughts were more complex, more confused. Already the generous sentiment drew him as at the first, but against it there tugged a force which had not then existed, a force none the less masterful for being ill-defined and not openly admitted. In part Frederick had himself suggested its existence. There is no one woman? he had said; and Alvano, in entire honesty, had replied, No, there is no one woman. The truth was he had never asked himself the question: and now the question, as is the way of such questions, asked itself.

The misfortune was that he had no answer ready. If

he could have told himself, No! with calm assurance, he would have brushed aside the Emperor's difficulties as of no weight: and, just as surely, if the answer had been a clear Yes! he—— There he broke off, since it is evident that his course would not have depended on himself alone: had not the Emperor said that great sorrow was in itself a vocation? And might not that great sorrow come through the one woman, since it is the one woman who brings to a man the great sorrow or the great joy of life?

But through the unreadiness one thing he knew—a face was always present to his memory, the same face but with subtle differences: now as first seen in the *atrium*, now as they confronted the Roman mob, her hand upon his shoulder; now with a light in the eyes as when he rode up to the litter beyond the walls, or as at Ferentino, or again that night in the great hall.

It was Frederick who broke the silence.

"Gregory is four-score and the Church looks forward," he repeated for the second time. "Upon whom do her eyes turn?"

"Pandone hopes upon—Pandone."

"Pandone?" The Emperor paused a moment in thought. "No, no; that must be checked. Pandone is too young." Again he paused, his eyes searching Alvano's face an instant. "Pandone? Crescenzo's ward is a Pandone. Why is she in Sicily?"

"She is seeking her mother's relatives: her mother was a Caldora as I am a Caldora."

"I see: a cousin, far removed? I remember now; you told me so this forenoon. A lovely face, Luca; I doubt if there is a lovelier in Capua." Alvano stirred uneasily but made no reply, and after the briefest of halts Frederick continued, "A Pandone and a cousin? Let us be frank, do you favor Pandone because of the cousinship?"

"Pandone? Not I, Your Grace." Alvano's warm vigour

of sincerity was unmistakable. "I distrust the man—distrust him utterly. Plausible and smooth-spoken though the Cardinal is I think Gregory is the more honest."

"And yet he sends Crescenzo to say one thing and Arsoli another," commented Frederick drily. "But let that pass. Your cousin, is she Roman-born? I think not?"

"No, your Grace," and very briefly Alvano told the story of Malazzorbo, not omitting its tragedy. Pacing slowly up and down the room the Emperor listened without interruption; then he said,

"She can have no great love for the Church?"

"No, Your Grace, she frankly admits it."

"And after less than three weeks of Rome she comes south to seek her cousins?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"I see. With such a memory haunting her Rome would naturally be distasteful," said Frederick, and plunged into the history of the weeks which had passed while Alvano was out of Sicily.

But in the secret of his own thoughts he told himself he guessed what lay behind the pretence of cousinship which had brought Bianca Pandone to Capua. Gregory was very old, her uncle, the Cardinal, looked forward—there might come a time when the goodwill of the Emperor might turn the scale in his favour.

CHAPTER XXII

GARDENS OF PARADISE

BIANCA'S stay in Rome had been of too short a duration to unlearn the country habit of a lifetime. Accustomed to wake with the dawn, her healthy energy refused to lie slug-a-bed, and it was Agata's grievance that if she wished to assist her mistress in her dressing she had to bestir herself early. That she so bestirred herself was by no desire of Bianca, but for reasons of her own the tire-woman lost her sleep, though grumblingly. Not even the morning after the arrival at Capua did she neglect her duties.

"Was I not right?" she said, triumphant complacency in her voice, as she lent Bianca an unwelcome aid. "There is a collar of pearls—what a fine figure of a man His Eminence is, he must love you very dearly—but it was not for last night. I was in the gallery, hidden in the shadows, and saw how the signorina drew all their eyes. I said there was not a Sicilian who could stand beside you, and there was not. That there were no jewels was a stroke of genius. All men like women to be demure at the first, afterwards—" she paused with a little outward shrugging gesture of her hands, "afterwards? That depends on the man."

"All that matters nothing to me," said Bianca, vexed at the growing familiarity she found herself impotent to curb, "nor do I intend to wear the pearls you speak of."

"This morning, signorina? Why, of course not! This morning—let me see," again she paused, looking her mistress up and down with shrewd, appraising eyes that seemed to see not the Bianca before her but the Bianca who would

be when her art had beautified her. "Yes, yes," she went on, nodding her head briskly, "the white linen that comes high up on the throat: not that you, signorina, have any need to hide your throat, but it is wisest for the present."

Again Bianca was stricken dumb. She would have liked to interpose a flat No to the tire-woman's choice, but of all the dresses Emilia's loving care had provided the white linen was the simplest and the one she would have herself selected.

"Yes," went on Agata, her tongue as busy as her hands, "and was I not right when I said the Empress was a raw girl? To see her last night by the side of my lord count! Not a word in her mouth and, I'll wager, not a thought in her head. A pretty head—I would be a fool to gainsay it—but after six months men weary of just prettiness, and the Emperor is a man if ever there was one."

"Agata," said Bianca sharply, "you must not say such things to me of the Emperor and Empress."

"Why not, signorina, since they are true and all the palace says them?" She stepped back, her eyes keenly vigilant as she judged the results of her labours, "Yes, that will do—all white except for this crimson ribbon at the waist. Some would add a bow at the throat, but not I: it would draw the eyes from the face. Signorina, take my advice, wear no headgear when you go out into the garden presently. You need none; Capua is not the Marches; no, nor even Rome, and the air is warm these early April mornings."

"The garden? What garden?"

For reply Agata threw up her hands in protest. "Signorina, have you never heard of the gardens of Capua? They say that His Highness, who does nothing by halves, has made them like paradise. And this is the very hour for seeing them at your leisure. There's no one astir but the guard, and if I know anything of gardens the sweet of the

morning, before the sun is hot, and when all the dew's a-sparkle, is the hour God made for enjoying them."

Hesitating, Bianca looked about her. There was much to attract in Agata's suggestion. The room, though luxurious, was dull: but little light came through the windows, wider than those of Rome or Malazzorbo, but yet narrow for the space they illuminated. The sun was no more than newly risen, not for two hours would Ursula di Crescenzo follow his example, while, to judge by Agata's movements the maid had more than two hours' employment for her clever hands. Two hours of the unpleasant tongue she could not silence? That would be hard to endure; to lie slug-a-bed, awake with her own thoughts, were better than that!

Also, Agata had stirred her curiosity, and more than her curiosity. Bianca loved a garden, as all must who have any spiritual kinship with the days before "Man's first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste brought death into the world, and all our woe, with loss of Eden." And while she halted between two opinions Agata settled the question for her in her dominant but not domineering way.

"Come, signorina," she said briskly, "I will show you the road, it would be easy to get lost in this great house;" and throwing open the door quietly, she waited for Bianca to precede her.

The palace—not altogether a palace, for whoso built a palace in those turbulent days built also a fortress, and not infrequently a prison—was very still. The thick walls which had dulled the morning light dulled also the sounds of outer life and, as Agata had said, within doors there was as yet but little movement. The very stillness lent Bianca decision, and without remonstrance she followed her tire-woman, now passing rapidly, but with obvious carefulness, in front of the Crescenzo apartments.

The broad stairway of Sicilian marble was void, void the lower corridors whose mouths they passed in their descent, and void, except for men-at-arms about the now open doors, and wide vaulted *atrium* with its fluted Doric pillars. Later in the day its mosaic pavement would ring under the spurred tread of Knights of the Empire, its nave and flanking aisles be filled by courtiers and officers of State; men of the East, men of the West; Moslems, Jews, Christians; poets and philosophers, men of science and men of the sword; but for the moment it was tenantless.

Like one who knew her way without guidance, and Bianca marvelled at her unhesitating assurance, Agata turned under an arch, through which drifted far-off murmurous sounds of life, traversed a minor hall, chose a corridor on the left and led the way out upon a flight of marble steps that, fan-wise, gave entrance to a stretch of greenery, illimitable greenery, between whose shadows a brawling stream, hastening to lose itself in the greater volume of the Volturno, flashed and glittered.

Obedient always to her own sufficient reasons the tirewoman made no delay.

"Already you can smell the spices," she said, drawing a deep breath of satisfaction. "For those who are wise, signorina, the gardens of Capua may well be paradise," then waiting for no reply, she re-entered the palace and disappeared.

The spices? Yes, Bianca could smell the spices. The air was very still. Upon herbage, and the spring-born green life pushing up from the brown earth, the dew gleamed and glistened, all a-sparkle, as Agata had said; on the marble terraces to right and left it lay in coalesced pools, or great swollen drops rapidly shrinking in the mild warmth of the sun. Through the solemn darkness of the night the world had been made afresh, and something of the pure glory of the Fatherland still clung to it.

Bianca had known many dawns but never one like this, never one with such an incense of warm perfume abroad upon the air. The musk of early roses was in its breath—roses she knew of old, but here was an airy essence subtler and more penetrating. Drawn by the sweetness she passed slowly down the steps, filling deeply her lungs as Agata had done, and joyously conscious of the good of life. Flecks of high colour gleaming from a restful depth of broad-leaved verdancy caught her gaze. Moved by curiosity she went nearer, and with every step the cloying sweetness in the air grew heavier, mounting to her brain like fumes of wine. Then she recognized the golden globes she had seen at supper last night for the first time and, miracle of miracles! there was not alone fruit ripe for the plucking, but flower in prodigal abundance, waxen, pure and perfect, intoxicating the soft air with perfume: Agata had spoken the truth, Capua's gardens were gardens of paradise.

From the orange grove Bianca wandered deeper into the wooded pleasaunce. Here was yet another new world, a world for whose making not Sicily alone but Egypt, Palestine and Byzantium had been ransacked. It was no wonder, therefore, that the new world was a strange world, with a revelation at almost every step. And yet there were old friends to welcome her, else even paradise would hardly be paradise. The pomegranate she knew, though not with the riotous luxuriance of Capua; the Madonna lilies in the making she also knew, but not their more slender sisters which would blossom presently into the scarlet lily of Greece. Sowbread lay thick in the shade: in sun-steeped spots palms lifted their tufted heads, well content; almonds were past their bloom, the tender green pushing out strongly on the naked boughs, but apricots were a pink cloud against the clear blue of the sky: purple flags were already in colour where sun and shelter gave them heart. The Star of Bethlehem had long done with flowering, even

in the shade, but the Byzantine sword-lily held its tapering flame as yet unsheathed.

Loitering yet further, finding new fascinations as she wandered, Bianca, had she but known it, stayed her steps by a pool that was pure Egypt. In the centre, broad and spreading, floated the blue lotus, flowerless as yet; from the shallows sprang the huge foliage of giant caladiums intermixed with the tufted papyrus reed, as luxuriant as in its native waters; while, half within the pool and half without, wide stretches of Nile lily bloomed white and virginal.

Near by, on an open slope remote from shade, stood a sundial, but as Bianca paused to read its message,

“God made the hours
For more than flowers;
Begone about your business.”

she was conscious of the sound of voices, or rather of a single voice raised in protest, and growing nearer with every second. Then the Emperor and Pier della Vigna passed from the shadows to the sunlight. It was Frederick who spoke.

“You have read his letter? Read you ever such another? By the Splendour of God, I will have His Holiness understand that—I am the first son of the Church.”

If there had been a break in the out-pouring of angry words as Frederick caught sight of the white-clad figure by the sundial, it would have taxed a calmer brain than Bianca's to have detected the changed ending; but being a woman quick in her intuitions she understood the sudden gesture which dismissed Vigna, and left her alone with the Emperor. What was the message of the dial—Begone about your business? Her business in Capua was to discover if the Crusade would sail. After a deep reverence she went forward to meet the Emperor.

"Signorina Pandone! For a moment I thought a goddess of the woods, from the fine old pagan faith, had come to life."

"Your Highness," she answered, "how shall I excuse myself for this intrusion? But indeed I am not to blame. They told me that at this hour the gardens were always free."

"They? Who are they?" asked Frederick.

His grey eyes were smiling, but behind the smile was a watchfulness which studied and approved the tall, straight figure still three yards away. On level ground he overtopped her in height but the rise of the slope levelled the inequality. That was one point in her favour; Frederick liked women to be tall but not so tall as to dwarf his own height. A weakness? If great men had no weaknesses they would almost cease to be men. He approved, too, the simplicity of her white dress with its single touch of colour; then the warm light of the sun, shining through her uncovered red-brown hair, drew his eyes, and he approved yet more—Agata's wisdom was justified. But even while he approved he remembered she was a Pandone, and in Sicily for a doubtful purpose.

"Who are they?" he repeated more curtly, climbing the slope as he spoke.

"It was my tire-woman——"

"A stranger? That explains it. All the palace knows this is my hour in the gardens."

It was more than the hint of censure, drily given, that sent the blood rushing in red shame to Bianca's face. In the same instant she divined that for a set purpose Agata had played cunningly upon her ignorance. All the palace knew, said Frederick, and the waiting-woman, who knew the turns and twists of the corridors so well, was not the one to miss a gossip of her fellow maids. What the purpose was Bianca had no leisure to analyse, but the

woman's last words flashed into her memory with a new significance, For those who are wise the gardens of Capua may well be Paradise.

"Your Grace, Your Grace," she cried, almost in tears, "I never dreamed it was an intrusion. At this hour I thought——"

"No intrusion: put that from you, once and for all." At the pain in the girl's voice Frederick's suspicions vanished; it was too poignant for pretence; clearly she was innocent of any pre-arranged intention to waylay him. Then he remembered that Pandone was amongst those in the Church who looked forward; this chance meeting, free from interruption, might have its advantages. "I think my good friend, the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte, is your uncle?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"But you are not all Roman? A cousin of Luca Alvano's must have some love to spare for Sicily?"

"But I know so little of Sicily," she stammered. Slowly she was regaining self-control; the very mention of Pandone's name had braced her to caution.

"We must mend that. To know Sicily is to love her. That is my one quarrel with Rome, it does not know Sicily. You, no doubt, have lived in Rome with the Cardinal since your mother died—four years ago?"

It flashed into Bianca's mind that if the Emperor knew her mother had died four years before he must also know that she had not lived these four years in Rome. Therefore he was fencing her, and with the knowledge she grew bolder, as strong natures will in the face of a known adversary.

"No, Your Grace, I lived on at Malazzorbo, where we were very poor. Then a month ago my uncle remembered me and sent for me to Rome."

“Only a month ago? And now you are in Sicily?”

Bianca laughed. She was now entirely mistress of her powers and unafraid of any unwary self-betrayal. “Oh, Your Grace, have you not heard that women are a law to themselves? And is there not a proverb that eating strengthens hunger? At Malazzorbo I starved, my uncle fed me with Rome, and——”

“Now you would devour Sicily? Truly a robust appetite! And what had the Cardinal to say to such a hunger?”

“Your Grace, I owed the Cardinal nothing. Women do not like to be forgotten; it is the one offence hard to forgive. My uncle should have sent for me sooner or left me in peace at Malazzorbo.”

“But you mistake,” said Frederick, his grey eyes smiling anew as he probed deeper. “The Cardinal had not forgotten; it was just that he had never seen you: had he seen you he could not have forgotten.”

Bianca let the flattery, direct though it was, pass her by as if unheard. “Oh, Your Grace,” she answered scornfully, “blood should never forget.”

Frederick laughed but without mirth. None knew better than he how easily blood forgot. “If Malazzorbo taught you that, then go back to Malazzorbo and keep your faith, lest in the great world you find that the nearer the blood the shorter the memory.”

He paused a moment, his eyes on the passionate face. As beauty in a picture where the artist’s genius has caught the soul of eternal things, beauty in the blue of the sea, sun-steeped and wind-swept to foaming rollers, beauty in a wide-flung landscape, hill, valley and plain, olive-yard, wheat land and pasture may thrill a man’s heart, so beauty in a woman thrilled Frederick’s, moving at times his baser nature but never to vileness. Thrice they had met, these two, and each meeting he had approved some new quality.

Now it was that hint of latent force which lent something of a man's strength to her womanly charm.

"Go back to Malazzorbo?" he repeated, nor had the pause been long. "No! You can do better than lose yourself in Malazzorbo, dreaming of blood brotherhood the world forgets; you can learn to love Sicily and then teach Rome to love her also."

"Teach Rome?" she stammered, confused a second time but from a different cause, "how can I teach Rome?"

"You are a Pandone; has Giordano Pandone climbed his highest? Above the greatness of the Cardinal there is a greater greatness. You owe it to your uncle——"

"I owe him nothing," she said, forgetting conventional respect in her hot haste, "nothing, nothing at all."

"Then let Sicily owe it to you—peace, Rome's trust, a time of quiet to grow great in art and commerce. But for that you must first know Sicily; must understand her aims, her needs, her hopes. Signorina, are you afraid of the Capua gardens in the morning?"

"No," she answered, looking him serenely in the eyes as Alvano might have done. "If I am to love Sicily why should I be afraid, since perfect love casts out fear."

CHAPTER XXIII

CAPUAN DAYS

To Agata, Bianca, passionately indignant though she was at the trick played upon her ignorance, spoke no word of censure. How, with any honesty could she, since she accepted the profit of the maid's treachery? And each morning the tiring-woman of Montelengo's choosing, her tongue in her cheek, watched her mistress descend the stairs on her way to the palace gardens: her task had been easier than His Eminence, the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte, had anticipated. One thing alone disturbed her—never, after that first morning, would her mistress wear so much as a ribbon that Ursula di Crescenzo had not first approved.

In the gardens Frederick was almost invariably alone. If Pier della Vigna were with him he was at once dismissed; Alvano was never present. And day by day a curious intimacy grew, an intimacy which, to the superficial observer, might have been full of danger for a girl unaccustomed to the heady wine of an Emperor's favour, drunk in such an atmosphere as that of sensuous Capua.

As things fell out there was no such risk. One reason, perhaps, was that Luca Alvano filled Bianca's thoughts more than she knew, and another that Frederick, however Oriental in his customs, was neither a Charles II nor a Louis XV. It would have astonished Agata and her fellow ill-tongued gossips of the palace, but the one subject they supposed uppermost in the Capua garden through these warm spring mornings was the subject neither so much as thought of.

Their talk was mostly of Sicily. At first Bianca, always with the thought of entrapping the Emperor into some admission which would clear away the cloud of doubt hanging above the sailing of the Crusade, pretended an enthusiastic interest she did not feel. But as Frederick's ideals unfolded themselves, splendid imaginings glowing in words of fire, indifference slipped into interest and interest into an enthusiasm the equal of his own.

Nor was Frederick's attitude surprising, Bianca's strange compound of ignorance and shrewd knowledge—ignorance of the intrigues of the great world and knowledge of needs gathered first-hand from the peasants of the Marches, was at once a stimulus and a whetstone, quickening his comprehension of the mind of the people.

From time to time, as if without purpose, she sounded him on the preparations for the Crusade. But always he fenced her; now with a jest, "Why talk of August in April? Sufficient unto the day is the good or the evil!" Now with an imperious, curt dismissal of the subject which forbade continuance.

But there came a day, April having grown to middle age, when she put a question hard to parry. As commonly, Frederick had been vehement on the progress Sicily must make under the guidance of those who understood her needs.

"And the Empress, no doubt, will carry on the work while you are in Palestine?"

He halted in his stride and turned on her almost as if in anger. "The Empress? Is Sicily a toy for a child to play with?"

"The Duke of Spoleto then?"

"It is Spoleto's one fault that he does not understand the people: he is of too old a generation."

"In that case," said she, speaking with purposeful deliberation, "for the sake of Palestine Sicily must suffer."

Then she added one of the shrewd hits such as had won him at the first. "Your Grace, I have lived among peasants and I know that land newly won from nature soon goes back to nature if left to itself: the weed seeds are not all out of it and they get the upper hand."

"Well?" he answered, and his voice was hard, "what then?"

"Just this: Your Grace, for ten years you have laboured with Sicily, leave her to herself and she goes back to nature: what are ten years in the life of a nation!"

For a moment she thought he was going to answer her in the Imperial vein which ended all discussion. But his mood changed, and his face was clouded with troubled care as he turned up the slope towards the sundial. There he halted, his fingers playing absently round the gnomon.

"Begone about your business," he quoted, as his gaze fell upon the grave motto. "That is, Do your duty as you see it and do it now." He looked up, and as their eyes met his grew keenly, alertly alive. "Half Roman, half Sicilian; part Pandone, part Caldora: which way does the balance tip? But it does not matter. No cousin of Luca Alvano's could betray a trust. Which is duty—the vow of the boy who understood little of his oath, or the needs of a nation which the man understands? No! Say nothing. Every man must deliver his own soul, and I have no doubt as to the answer, nor have had for years. If Honorius were alive, the good, kindly man would accept my reading of it, but this grey old wolf of a Gregory, full of his own greatness and drunk with his conception of the greatness of the Church, will excommunicate, curse and damn——" He broke off, his chin lifted. "If it were but myself, the man Frederick, he might rave his bitterest and hurl what threats his senile anger teaches him. If there's a God above all, He will understand. But the Pope will go further, he will lay the whole land under interdict,

he will force war on our peace, will turn the clock back not ten years but fifty, and upon me—me—lies the decision!”

As she listened to the outburst Bianca’s smouldering heart leaped into fire. “No Roman, Your Grace—Sicilian, all Sicilian. Pandone? I owe nothing to Pandone, no! nor to the Church: and surely Sicily has need of you.”

“Aye,” he answered, calming. “If, as I say, Gregory would strike Frederick only. But the interdict! Do you understand what that means for the innocent? No dead, not your dearest, to have Christian burial, no child baptized, no man or maid married, the churches closed upon their darkened altars, the Host banished, the land heathen, the souls of Frederick’s people damned for Frederick’s sins.”

“No!” she said, shrinking and trembling, “never! never! You misjudge His Holiness. Old, Gregory may be, old and grey, but no wolf. I have seen him——”

“Yes, lording it in the splendour of the procession!”

“Nearer than that—there, in the Vatican, face to face——”

He interrupted her roughly, a sudden flush reddening his fair skin, “In the Vatican? You?”

There was interrogation in the voice, yet Bianca was silent. Her generous warmth had led her further than was wise, and explanations were difficult. At the continued silence Frederick’s dulled suspicions woke afresh.

“Nothing Roman—all Sicilian!” he said with biting sarcasm. But the girl met the hinted contempt without flinching.

“Now, Your Grace, yes, as God lives—but not then, then I was ignorant.”

Frankly, boldly, the boldness of conscious good faith, her eyes met his, and as the Emperor read their message

he softened. "I think I understand. Of Luca Alvano's cousin I ask no questions—no explanations. You were in the Vatican?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Such an old, old man; very old, very grey, very tired. But there was nothing of the wolf. Rather, he seemed at times hardly of this world. A wolf? No! His hand shook as it lay upon my head; when he blessed me his voice was very gentle and very weary. Again and again he said he longed for peace. Your Grace, if he understood as we understand, surely—surely——," She broke off, doubtful how to clothe her thought in words; the thought natural to the generous enthusiasm of youth, that the crying needs of Italy must surely come first in every Italian heart, be he Pope or peasant.

Nor was there need for expression; Frederick understood the unfinished sentence. Also, Bianca's insistence had shaken him into something like doubt of Alvano's firm conviction, and his own no less firm belief.

"Perhaps," he said slowly, "yes, perhaps it is so. From the heights of the Papal chair Gregory may see clearer than Ugolino Conti. But who shall find out the truth?"

To that question Bianca had no answer ready at the moment.

That, as has been said, was when April had grown to middle-age. Meanwhile, no day had passed in which Capua and the court did not strive to show honour to Gregory's embassy. City and palace alike kept holiday. Jousts and tourneys Frederick would not permit. Italians, he said, had other use for sword and lance, even in play; but privately he feared lest the emulation of mock warfare should breed real strife between Sicily and Rome. But in their place there were banquets, hunting-parties, hawking-parties, fêtes; there was even, to Arsoli's great scandal, a display by Frederick's Saracen dancing-women.

To Bianca, who had never so much as heard of Saracen

dancers, the slow, rhythmic posturings in an Eastern barbaric splendour to a music wierd and unearthly, were of breathless interest and without offence. If at times a white arm writhed into sight a moment, the filmy gauze flung across the head, and descending almost to the feet, clothed the dancer with impersonality. But even while the pipes still mingled their shrill wailings with the tinkling of lutes and the clash of cymbals, Arsoli gathered his robe about him and left the audience hall without so much as a bow to Yolande, by whose side he sat. His secretary and chaplain followed him, some thought with reluctance.

"Alas!" said Frederick with mock regret, as the number ended, "I fear neither I nor my poor dancers will ever win favour with the Church! On my soul, I think they see something in us both which does not exist."

"Ah, Your Grace," answered Ursula di Crescenzo, her clear voice sounding with significance over half the hall, "if each would lift the veil the Church might be better content!"

During these days, whether hunting or hawking, or on the riding excursions towards the hills, Alvano was thrown much with Bianca. The Empress, petulant, young even for her years, and lacking that wifely wisdom which in high or low finds and expresses an interest in what interests the husband, professed a dislike for such rough sport. Ursula di Crescenzo, therefore, rode with the Emperor or, for reasons of policy, remained with Yolande in Capua. In her absence Count Marco took her place, and Frederick's intercourse with Bianca was limited to the simple courtesies of a public greeting.

Such an arrangement was entirely to Alvano's liking; nor, being a man who thought little of himself where women were concerned, did he imagine for a moment that the close and growing daily intimacy might be fraught with ultimate pain for Bianca. Even when the youth of Capua,

drawn like flies to a honey-pot as Agata had foreseen, challenged his privileges to their own discomfiture he saw no deeper than a shy preference for one who was both cousin and early friend.

That his increasing distaste to the bold scheme, whereby he might in his own person win the Papacy to the cause of the Empire for the glory of Italy, was due to the coming of Bianca into his life he did not now disguise from himself. Nor, with that distaste daily quickened, was it difficult now to see flaws and objections, pitfalls of failure even, which enthusiasm had formerly brushed aside or left unconsidered.

The whole plan was a chain of "if" and "perhaps," and with the failure of any one link it snapped like a pack-thread. *If* the influence of the Empire procured his rapid advancement to the Cardinalate, *perhaps* the violent Church party, at present so antagonistic, would not become suspicious; *if* Gregory, or Gregory's successor, forced war, *perhaps* the Curia would desire peace; *if* he won to himself a party in the Conclave, *perhaps* it would be strong enough to carry the election; *if* Gregory died—*if* Gregory's successor died—*if—if—if——!*

And through and over and beyond every "if" sounded Frangipani's warning, Frangipani, who knew Rome and the Church as few knew them—No Pope can ever be a Ghibelline! It was little wonder that, riding day by day at Bianca's side, Alvano found the cost greater than he had counted and the gain more doubtful; little wonder, too, that there was a cloud across the April sun, a sting of winter in the warm April air, a blight upon the riot of young April life.

So he rode moodily, in a dull abstraction that often forced Bianca to the company of her own thoughts. And in such an association, with her thoughts as company, Bianca had no difficulty in knowing the truth—Luca

Alvano had grown to be more than kin. Women—women such as Bianca Pandone—are more honest with themselves than men ever can be; knowing the truth she did not attempt to disguise it from herself, but with the knowledge there came that unconscious defence against self-revelation which in all such women is, as it were, the spirit's modesty hiding from peeping eyes. The better she understood herself the more aloof she grew; pleasant familiarities of comradeship, which had insensibly grown up between them, fell into disuse, and as her heart warmed her speech and manner chilled.

It was therefore little wonder if, misreading the signs, Luca Alvano told himself with a bitter heart that he need not pause for Bianca's sake. Yet, even while the very bitterness of heart found a certain satisfaction in contemplating the irrevocable step of entering the priesthood, he hesitated to tell her his purpose—because of the story of Malazzorbo she had no great love for the Church.

CHAPTER XXIV

FLINT AND STEEL

BUT though Frederick banned the mock warfare of joust and tourney he substituted a spectacle which might be more to Crescenzo's taste, while hinting a message not to be missed even by Arsoli's arrogance.

"The Holy Father, whose love has lent us your presence in Sicily, Lord Bishop," he said, "will naturally ask what are the prospects of the Crusade now assembling at Palermo."

"Ah! so there is a Crusade assembling at Palermo?" Arsoli's eyebrows were lifted as he spoke. "That will be good news to His Holiness!"

"No news, I think," answered Frederick drily. "Those Franciscan brothers to the sun, moon and seven stars, and the Dominicans, *Domini canes*, Hounds of the Lord, who swarm in packs in Palermo, must have kept Gregory informed."

"Seekers after truth, and with little result for their labours," retorted the Bishop, no whit disturbed at the hint of espial.

"Truth? To-day I shall show you three thousand truths not to be gainsaid even by Rome," replied the Emperor. "Count Marco, we hope for the presence of the Countess and Signorina Pandone at the palace gates in an hour, and you also, Your Grandeur; perhaps you will be better pleased than with my poor dancers. As to the horses, the grooms have their orders."

This time the Empress was of the riding party, her pretty, childish face less petulantly discontented than

Bianca had ever before seen it. It may be that being the resplendent centre of a glory of splendour moved her to complacency. And not even in the procession of His Holiness had Rome shown a more splendid individual magnificence. From the seven trumpeters who, with the heralds of Sicily and the Empire in their tabards blazoned with their master's arms, headed the train, down to the Palace Guard closing the rear, the long line of knights and dames, nobles and courtiers, princes of the Empire, and princes of the Church shone and sparkled in the sun like a jewelled belt from a woman's waist.

Yolande and the Emperor were in tissue of gold, and the duller gleam of the yellow metal fought for recognition with the polished and damaskeened steel of bit, stirrup and horse-housing; as in the days of Solomon, silver was nothing accounted of when Frederick rode in state. Nor were Spoleto, Bavaria, and Landgrave and the rest far behind their master. If there was a difference it was no greater than showed that Frederick was Emperor, and yet was slight enough to say: The Emperor is not alone the greatness and the glory of Sicily and the Empire. Only where the Romans rode was there a flaw of dulness in the splendour; taken unawares they rode as to a hawking party.

And yet Ursula di Crescenzo snatched a partial victory out of the apparent defeat. Recognising the position at a glance, she paused before mounting at the palace gates and beckoned to a page.

"Take this to His Excellency's apartments," she said, loosening a broad-linked gold chain from her neck, then, smiling, mounted to her place by the Emperor's side.

"Countess," said Frederick, "you make our richness seem poor."

"Your Grace," she retorted, "your richness is no poorer than—your richness. Rome is in Rome, not in Sicily,"

and rode forward still smiling. A woman's bitter wit is like the head of an arrow, a small thing, and yet finding a way through a joint in the armour. Before Capua gate was passed Frederick was not so sure that Sicily had scored a point over Rome.

That Capua knew the unusual was afoot was shown by the crowds of towns-folk thronging the road taken by the heralds. Everywhere the shops were closed or almost deserted and the city made holiday, but without that latent truculence which lent even the laughter of the Roman mob a hint, if not a threat, of tragedy.

And yet, like all Italian crowds, they were open in their preferences. Yolande they greeted with respectful silence; they knew her for a cypher and as a cypher let her pass. For the Emperor they shouted themselves hoarse; Arsoli they frankly cursed as only Southern Italians can curse; while to the German princes they gave the same dumb greeting which had met the Empress, but it was a dumbness with a difference; they represented the Crusade and Capua did not love the Crusade.

Bianca, to her astonishment, was singled out for a warm welcome, but with an association of her name with that of Alvano, by whose side she rode, which sent the blood to her cheeks and a rush of warmth to her heart. Once she glanced at him, the dawn of a smile in her eyes, but Alvano, his brows knit, looked neither to right nor left nor seemed to hear, and the dawn clouded.

Beyond the city gates—not the northern or Roman gate, but that which opened towards the river—the procession increased its pace to a rapid trot, and, quitting the highway, turned through a scattered spread of villas and gardens which led to the open country. Here stretched the broad, unfenced pastures surrounding Capua, pastures broken by groves of luxuriant chestnut or walnut trees, now in their freshest beauty.

Upon the edge of this flat, grassy plain was gathered half Capua, flanking a knoll whose sharp rise dominated the league-long pastures. Upon this hillock the Emperor's standard was set up, and there the procession halted. To the left, abreast of the rising ground but a long furlong off, a denser wood than common stretched northwards.

"Count Marco, choose your place where you will," said Frederick. "All Italy knows that where men and arms are you go where it pleases you, and it is ill for any to say you nay. Your Grandeur, bide here by me, who am a man of peace as truly as you are. Sound the call, trumpeters!"

As the Emperor ended he raised his hand, palm outwards. Instantly the seven trumpets blared as one, and while the echoes still flew Hermann of Salza rode at a trot from behind the cover of the wood on the left. Over the light chain-armour, which showed in gleams at the throat and wrists, he wore the sabre-crossed white surcoat of his Order; in his right hand he held a drawn sword, the blade resting in the hollow of the bridle arm.

Behind him, in a double line, came a hundred of the Teutonic knights, garbed and armed like their leader, each followed by four mounted men-at-arms with swords at the thigh and steel upon head and breast. Wheeling slowly, they passed the knoll at a foot pace, looking neither to one side nor the other, the only sound the tramping of hoofs and the rattle of bridle chains.

"Give me men like these," said Crescenzo, who had reined up alongside Alvano, "and the Arno ford would not stop me!"

"Wait," said Frederick, who overheard, and raised his hand the second time.

Again the trumpets blared. This time it was a company on foot, marching ten deep, that swept out in close order from the shelter of the timber. They were Sicilian

cross-bow men, each with his quiver of bolts at his hip, his arbalist on his shoulder and a long shield-like garment of pliant cowhide covering him from throat to knee. Round by the knoll's foot they swept, marching as one man, every swing of the shoulder, every shift of the foot in accurate time, their unison the smooth co-ordination of a great machine, and in silence passed on.

German pikemen followed, a bulkier, taller breed than the Sicilians, as men need to be whose weight is behind their weapons. They wore iron bonnets and light body armour as far as the waist, and the head of every man's weapon, carried at the slant upon the shoulder, blazed in the sun like a spurt of flame.

But at the fourth blaring of the trumpets Bianca caught her breath and Arsoli, forgetting to hide the man in the priest, swore softly. Again it was a troop of horsemen, but a troop who bore no blazon of the Cross upon the breast. Fierce faced, black bearded, swarthy of skin, there was no need of the naked scimitar or wind-swept, white burnous to proclaim them children of the East. The very beasts they rode—light, fine-limbed arabs, small in the bone, small in the head, wide in the eye and nostril, and with a springing lilt gait all their own, told their origin. At their head rode Sheik Hussein, and all knew them for what they were before the Emperor broke the silence with four words flung like a challenge.

“My Saracens from Lucera.”

For once it was Crescenzo who had an answer readiest. “With such men I could do more than force a ford; I think I could storm the mouth of hell itself.”

“Small wonder if you could!” said Arsoli, his voice hard in a sneer. “What would that be but their home going!”

“You mistake, Lord Bishop,” retorted the Emperor.

"It is the Christian who strikes at his own home and blood; my Saracens are faithful to bread and salt."

"And yet they will fight against their fellow devils in Palestine! A strange faithfulness, truly!"

"Again you mistake," Frederick answered drily. "These and the rest are not for Palestine. They are the three thousand truths not to be gainsaid. These I leave behind to protect my kingdom, and Sicily has many more like them. Did you think I would leave Sicily stripped bare to the bones for wolves to pick?"

"And where would the wolves come from, Your Grace?"

"Where do wolves come from but from the north?"

"But the Crusade is holy, those who fight for the Lord's sepulchre sacred; who would dare lay impious hands on what the Church held in keeping?"

"Aye," replied Frederick, still drily, "but who would keep the keepers? A wise man sees to his own house, Your Grandeur."

By this time the troop of white-clad horsemen had defiled past, as silent as those they followed. To Bianca there was something sinister in their silence and their set faces, so fierce yet so unemotional. It was as if the dead who had died in their wild battle-passion, with their lust for blood hot in them, now rode coldly savage among the living.

Twice, thereafter, the Emperor gave his sign, and twice the trumpets blared, summoning in turn companies of Greek mercenaries, armed with javelins, and Sicilian archers, their five-foot weapons slung with full quivers on their backs. They, too, passed in silence.

Meanwhile Salza had led his troops round in a half circle, wheeling it in double column so that it faced the hillock two or three furlongs distant; there they halted. In behind them, also in double column, turned the horsemen of the East, while at either side, fronting each other across

the head of Salza's troop, were the foot soldiers, led by the Sicilian companies. The formation was that of a giant truncated T, the Saracen horsemen being the stem.

For the last time the Emperor raised his hand and at the blared note of the trumpet call Salza set spurs to his horse. In the beginning he and his troop rode slowly, but, gaining speed at every stride, soon broke into a gallop that in the last furlong quickened to such a hurricane charge of thundering hoofs, levelled lances and naked sword blades, that Bianca, her teeth set, her breath sobbing in her throat, caught at and held Alvano with an unconscious hand. Then, with the leaders no further than a lance length from the slope, the whole troop broke with one voice into a mighty roar of acclamation. "Sicily! Sicily! God for Sicily and the Empire!" and, splitting ranks, bore to right and left that in their place might thunder, with a still wilder fierceness, the men of the East, crying the same cry, Moslem though they were; while down and across his arab's neck each leaned with brandished scimitar, his swarthy, passionate face yet swarthier and more passionate in the fury of the onset. At the foot of the slope they, too, divided, wheeling their horses upon their very haunches that the footmen, converging from either side, might maintain the charge, echoing and re-echoing the hoarse salute "Sicily! Sicily! God for Sicily and the Empire!" Nor did that end the acclamation. From right and left half Capua joined in the cry, shouting it as men shout whose hearts are hot within them until the dense, upstanding walls of foliage rolled it back in echo.

But Frederick's eyes, glistening with pride and afire with exultation, were not on Capua's citizens but on his troops, now forming in a solid line facing the hillock, East and West, Cross and Crescent, emblazoned surcoat and white burnous, side by side; and over all the standard of Sicily, of Jerusalem and the Empire.

"The greatest power in the world!—the greatest!—the greatest!" he said in an underbreath that shook.

But Arsoli heard and answered. "There is a greater, Your Highness—the power of the keys. The power to shut or to open, to bless or to curse, is greater than the power to kill. Your Grace, will the Crusade sail in August?"

Stung by the discourteous brusqueness of the question and the scarcely veiled threat which foreran it, the Emperor turned fiercely on the prelate.

"How can I tell? Am I God to prophesy that which shall be?"

"Then it is your Grace's purpose that it shall sail?"

"Of what account are my purposes, or any man's, Lord Bishop, when it is God who says aye or nay? Come, my heart, and you, fair ladies, the play's played out for to-day. Count Marco, ride by me and tell me what flaws your skill would mend were my men yours."

But as Crescenzo turned his horse to follow the Emperor, Arsoli caught the bridle an instant. "Did you hear him? The play's played—for to-day! It was a threat. Is it not time we were in Rome?"

Loosening hold he reined back to where, higher up the slope, his chaplain stood with a group of the Franciscan and Dominican monks who had travelled with the embassy. Amongst them was brother Cornelius, his eyes glittering with excitement, the fever flush warm on his smooth cheeks. To these Arsoli turned, all self-control flung to the winds.

"The Church is paltered with—played upon—tricked! You heard how he fenced me? You heard how he threatened? Crusade? There will be no Crusade while this Herod, this leaguer with Mahound lives to jeer at his oath. Is there none to rid the Church of this enemy to the Cross?" He broke off, crossing himself with a hand

that trembled. "Alas! how the flesh prevails against the spirit. Forget, brethren, what I said in my haste. In His own time God will provide His vengeance; blessed be His hand! Come friends, let us return to this Capuan Gomorrah; but I think the Holy Father and the faith have need of us all."

CHAPTER XXV

THE ADVICE OF THE GREY FRIAR

NEXT morning Bianca was surprised to find Brother Cornelius on the terrace overlooking the gardens. Though he and his fellow monks, whether of his own or the Dominican order, were in no sense attached to the embassy, Frederick, little as he liked or trusted them, had allotted them quarters in the palace, leaving them free to come and go as they pleased. The Franciscan's presence, therefore, was not in itself astonishing. But since none knew the current gossip so exhaustively as the monks—never were there such pickers-up of floating trifles—it followed that Brother Cornelius was perfectly well aware that he was defying custom in approaching the gardens at all in the morning hour when they were devoted to the Emperor's privacy. His presence vexed the girl, proving that she was watched, for he made no secret that he was there to waylay her.

"God be with you," he began, coming to meet her at the top of the marble flight fanning-out into the pleasaunce. "I know no greater wish, since He cannot be with us if we do not desire to be with Him, and to those who desire Him He is never far off. Our good brother the sun is warm in his love to-day."

"Yes," assented Bianca, "it is pleasant here in the garden at this hour."

"It is paradise," he said dreamily. "Our gentle sisters, the flowers, are at their sweetest and freshest." Abruptly his voice and manner changed; he ceased folding his thin hands in one upon the other, a trick of his when absorbed,

and they fell trembling, though the long fingers were doubled upon the palms in an effort to force control. "Yes, a very paradise; but, sister, in that other Eden, of God's making and not man's, there lurked the enemy of mankind and the thief of souls. I, who had such great need of merciful judging judge not, but it behooves us all to guard our feet lest they slip—lest they slip." In the end his voice trailed away again into such a gentleness that Bianca could take no offence; nor, indeed was offence intended, though his meaning was plain.

"I pray God to keep mine," she said.

At that he roused himself. "Yes, yes, so must we all. But there is always light to walk by when self does not throw a shadow on the path." He paused, coughing, and with the unconscious gesture of custom put up a hand where the grey robe hung loosely over the pinched chest. "Now I," he went on, as the fit subsided, "thinking only of myself, had hoped to die in Palestine. There I was wrong. God's grace has shown me a nearer and a better road."

"Are you not stronger here in the south?" asked Bianca, her pity tender in her eyes.

Before answering the Franciscan looked wistfully round the sun-steeped garden, where every new day wrought a new miracle in opening bud or glory of the full-blown flower.

"My weakness is my strength," he said at last. "Dear mother earth is so beautiful that she is hard to leave. Flesh cries, No! But weakness says an Aye there is no denying, and spirit whispers——" He broke off, a trouble on his gentle face that was not the sorrow of parting from dear mother earth. "Sister, do you think God can be as near to Sicily as to Palestine?"

"Why not?" she answered, awed to yet greater pity. "Are not His mercies everywhere?"

"Why, yes! And if the Here is so beautiful what must the Beyond not be! So the shorter road is the best.

Only, God grant that I take a soul with me on my way. Sister, is it true what they say—that His Highness does not go to confession?”

The question startled Bianca into silence almost as much by the abrupt shift of thought as by its strangeness. Then she remembered Frederick's contemptuous reply to Arsoli the day before, and suspicion woke. If the friars were spies of the Church in Palermo why not also in Capua, and this strangely-flung question an attempt to fix some charge of heresy on the Emperor to put him wrong with the world? She parried with a countering question.

“How should I know, and why do you ask?”

“All the palace knows you for his friend—God keep your feet,” he answered. “As to why——” He ceased, the cough choking him, and this time the hand that caught at his breast was shaking as it had not shaken in the former paroxysm. “As to why,” he repeated, looking out across the gardens and drawing the grey robe closer about him as if even in the sun he felt a chill creeping over him, “sister, there is the Crusade. Men talk; they say there will be no Crusade—pray God they lie; they say His Highness, with his Saracens, both fighting men and women dancers, is no better than a heathen—I am very bold, and humbly pray God they lie.” Again he paused, his hands twitching and trembling even while the finger-tips bit in upon the palms in the renewed effort at self-control. When he continued he looked not at Bianca but beyond her. “If it were known that the Emperor revered the Sacraments of the Church, and obeyed her ordinances, it might silence these evil tongues. Most earnestly, sister, most earnestly, and with all my strength of heart and soul, I desire His Highness's greatest good. We are humble folk, we poor followers of good Francis of Assisi, but we mix with the people as their friends and guides. If even I could say of my own knowledge that His Highness—sister, you who are his friend

pray him, beseech him, entreat him, to give the proof to the world and to give it soon, very soon."

The appeal perplexed Bianca sorely. Of the Franciscan's sincerity and deep-hearted earnestness there could be no question. His eyes were shining, his thin, smooth face aglow with the excitement of his urging. If this had been some personal private boon upon which his whole soul were set he could not have been more engrossed, more eagerly insistent that there should be no denial. In his absorption his nervousness had fallen from him so that his hands had ceased to tremble. It was as if he had dreaded the entering upon his petition, but being entered in had lost his fear. Human nature is like that where the sense of need is bred out of the very core of the spirit.

And yet, in spite of the friar's honest earnestness, the girl felt her suspicions return tenfold. The knowledge gleaned through all these past weeks cried a doubt to her. The Church feared and hated the Emperor, Arsoli would exult if he could trip him to his own downfall: the brothers of these newly-founded monkish orders were the devoted, unquestioning servants of the Church, her tools even; and yet here was a Franciscan urging what needs must make any attack on the orthodoxy of the Emperor more difficult. Why? Brother Cornelius was transparently honest, but what lay beyond the honesty? Bianca could find no answer to the question, and her solution of the problem showed her wisdom.

"I shall tell His Highness what you say; but urge him? entreat him? No! These things are for a man's own conscience."

"Surely it is expedient——" But Bianca cut sharply across the argument.

"Expediency? Do you, a monk of God, plead expediency?"

"I plead for a man's soul," he answered, with greater

boldness than he had yet shown. "Sister, if the Emperor agrees that I am right will you tell me, that I may be present in the church?"

"Yes," she assented, "I will tell you. If he agrees, the rest lies with you."

"God knows, and God have mercy," he replied. "But, sister, let it be very soon. Peace be with you."

As the monk returned to the palace Bianca descended the steps, still full of troubled thought. Her conclusion was that there was some scheme afoot of forcing Frederick into the Crusade, that thereby he might demonstrate to the world his unswerving fidelity to the Church. That his faith was not that of a devotee Bianca by this time knew. His employment of Saracen troops, a naked warning shaken in Arsoli's face the day before, as well as his talk with her at the sundial on the morning of the spectacle, had shown the girl clearly that Frederick claimed both freer thought and freer liberty of action than the Church could openly grant. But just as clearly she knew that if the Emperor would outwardly conform to the Church's commands, not Gregory himself, grey old wolf though he might be, would launch anathema at his inward lukewarmness of faith. Failing a willing compliance on Frederick's part, Arsoli, Gregory's self in spirit, and more truly his envoy than Crescenzo, might so plan as to force a compliance whose unwillingness Rome would ignore. Well, her duty was clear—she must lay the Franciscan's entreaty before the Emperor and leave events to stronger hands than her own.

Commonly Bianca, more eager day by day for the fresh sweetness of the morning air as the heat of advancing spring grew greater, had the garden to herself for a time, Frederick, on such occasions as he joined her, entered by a small door at the foot of his private staircase. But this morning he was before her; she found him pacing the slope

between the sundial and the Egyptian pool, his chin on his breast, his hands locked behind his back.

At the sound of her footfall he raised his head, the cloud in his eyes lifting as he looked that frank admiration which, with a different nature than Bianca's or one who was not a cousin of Luca Alvano's, might have had a significance to justify the Franciscan's admonition.

"You are late and I am pressed for time," he began, acknowledging her customary reverence with a gesture. Friends they might be, but Frederick was at all times the Emperor. "What has detained you?"

"A message for Your Highness."

"Then let it wait. Bianca, you who are half a Caldora, are you truly all Sicilian as you said yesterday?"

The curt, direct question called for a curt, direct reply; and Bianca gave it, pausing to weigh no reasons for its asking.

"Always and altogether, Your Grace."

"I thought no less. You, I think, are one whose word is her word. Will you go on a mission to Pandone for me?"

"Pandone?" she repeated, startled, "my uncle, the Cardinal?"

Frederick nodded, and with the natural, careless gesture of man to man in frank comradeship, though there is little doubt he knew Bianca was neither Alvano nor Pier della Vigna, the Emperor slipped his hand under her arm and drew her with him under the trees.

"What you said yesterday sticks to me like a burr in sheep's wool. Gregory the Pope may see clearer—be broader in mind, more truly a lover of Italy, than Ugolino Conti the Cardinal-Bishop of Ostia. Pandone will know. Sound Pandone. Gregory is old; there must soon be another election: sound Pandone. The good-will of the Empire is not to be despised in the Conclave—sound Pan-

done. I could send Alvano or della Vigna, but this is work for a woman's handling; a man's clumsier wit might spoil all. Bianca, will you go for me—and yet not so much for me as for Sicily?”

“Your Grace, will the Crusade sail?”

“Why do you ask?”

For a moment Bianca made no reply, so busy was she setting her thoughts in order. Her first impulse was to answer, Because I am here for nothing else than to know the truth. But she put the impulse aside. What need was there to confess to Frederick, and through him to Luca Alvano, that she was in Sicily as a spy? To Alvano the treason against his master might well be the one sin impossible to forgive, and more and more Bianca realized that to be at odds with Luca Alvano was to live in the cold of the world. The question had been asked in a vague assumption that the knowledge might aid her with Pandone, but now it was hard to justify. Certainly the knowledge would never be used as it would have been in her early days in Capua. Then she thought she saw a link which led on to the Franciscan's request.

“His Holiness is very jealous for the Church. If he knew the Crusade would certainly sail unless he restrained its sailing it might content him. It would be an admission of his power as Pope.”

“It will certainly sail if need must, but not unless,” answered Frederick grimly. “The preparations are ripe but not over-ripe—they could wait and take no harm. Pandone, I am told, is in favour: can Pandone win time?”

“Your Grace, help him to win time: this is the message which kept me late this morning.” Very briefly, but not without diffidence and difficulty, she told how she had been waylaid upon the terrace, told the suggestion urged by Brother Cornelius and the reason he gave for the urging. Nor did Frederick interrupt her, though his grey eyes

darkened and the full lips tightened out of their comely lines as he listened. "Your Grace," she ended, reading easily the signs of his rising anger, "if I have offended it is for Sicily's sake; but might not this, too, aid me with my uncle?"

"No offence of yours," he burst out in wrath. "These prying monks go too far. Already they think themselves priests and as priests Gods! But this is Arsoli's work: this is his greatness of the Church to bless or curse. Yesterday I showed him the littleness of Rome, to-day he shakes the Keys in my face! But by the Splendour of God——"

"Your Grace, Your Grace," cried Bianca, greatly daring, for Frederick in his wrath was not always heedful where his offended anger found vengeance. "The monk was honest, that I will swear. He is a poor creature, dying before our eyes—a frail shred of life, so full of a great spirit that it frays his little strength to weakness. Your Grace—oh! if I offend forgive me—what if he spoke the truth? What if men's tongues whisper evil wrongfully? What if he could right the wrong and strike a weapon from Arsoli's hand? What if I might go to the Cardinal and say——"

But Frederick, in his turn, interrupted the passion of pleading. Already the fires of his wrath had burnt low, and though the heat lingered there was now no consuming flame.

"Aye—the Cardinal: perhaps you are right. Differ honestly and Rome will curse; conform and she will bless—there Arsoli spoke truth! Perhaps your friar is right. Evil tongues there are, God wot." He paused, his brow knit, his mouth hard in compression. "The sooner the better, he said? There your shred of a monk is right: Pandone must be sounded without delay. To-morrow-morning, at six, in the private chapel: after that—Rome."

CHAPTER XXVI

FOR THE GREATER GLORY OF GOD

THE Franciscan received the news of Bianca's success without emotion. The excited exaltation of the morning had died utterly away and, perhaps by natural reaction, a gloomy depression seemed to have taken its place.

"Six o'clock?" he repeated, almost absently. "Yes, the early morning will be best; at such an hour there will be few about." Then he roused himself as if putting aside the subject as ended. "Sister, surely you were wrong this morning; how can God be as near to Sicily as to Palestine, where His Son died for men? And I had hoped to die there too—perhaps at Bethlehem, perhaps at Bethany, perhaps even near the tomb itself. Now that can never be," and he sighed shiveringly.

"But why should you not go on the Crusade?" she answered, leaving his mysticism aside and keeping, like the practical woman she was, to the practical issue.

"Crusade? There will be no Crusade! How can there be a Crusade while—but I forget; you are his friend. With all my soul I pray that God has indeed kept your feet. Six o'clock? Then I shall hear our little brothers, the birds, sing matins as I keep vigil: after that the time will not be long. Peace be with you, sister." He paused, his mouth tremulous, a world of sorrow dumb behind the tears starting in his gentle eyes. "Would to God I could give myself the peace I pray for you."

That day passed, as its fellows had done, in mutual courtesies between Capua and Rome, but through every

hour of it Bianca was conscious of a tightening tension. Crescenzo, the soldier, had taken the previous day's spectacle in good part, seeing in it nothing more than the frank and open mind of a man who desired peace, showing cogent reasons why he should be left in peace; but it was clear to all that Arsoli, being ready to take offence, had found offence. Betwixt him and the Emperor, then, the courtesies were those of men who openly recognize the other's will to hurt, given the opportunity—a state of things that, for comfort, may be likened to a lighted candle set in a barrel of gunpowder; sooner or later the explosion must come, and at any moment a spark may scatter wreck and destruction. Plainly, therefore, Brother Cornelius and the Emperor were right—there was much need for haste.

And yet the knowledge that there would be no delay brought little comfort to Bianca. The more she considered the intervention of the Franciscan the more doubtful and anxious she grew. The old question, Why should Gregory's monk thwart Gregory's purpose? clamoured afresh, and found no plausible answer. For righteousness sake? But to the monk the Church stood for righteousness, and if it was the will of the Church publicly to brand Frederick as schismatic—no doubt for the good of Christendom and for Frederick's own soul's health—why should Brother Cornelius, the Church's servant, thwart that will? A trap, then? to obtain through the confessional what Frederick evaded in open speech? But the Emperor would confine himself to sins of the past, and in April would certainly not confess to the breaking of an oath in August.

So the argument ran round in a circle, finding no point of solution. Nor did the monk's mental attitude help her; it was, rather, an added confusion that he, whose strength had rallied in the south, and who had hoped to die in Palestine, wept that his time was near at hand but God's peace far off. Why? It was then that Bianca Pandone

grew afraid of she knew not what, and, saying nothing of her fear, turned to Alvano under the natural guidance of her woman's heart.

Alvano listened with growing uneasiness and surprise. It was, perhaps, natural that of all the palace he was one of the few whom the gossip that linked Bianca's name with the Emperor failed to reach. But the memory of Frederick's frank admiration on the day of their first meeting came back to him, together with disjointed recollections of words let fall by the Emperor that same night. Frederick's Orientalism was well known—half in fury he broke in upon her story,

"His Grace? Confession in the palace chapel at six o'clock to-morrow morning? How do you come to know His Grace's private plans, and of all things, his purpose to confess?"

"By chance," she answered, flushing at his angry vehemence, but not displeased since the open jealousy carried a comforting assurance with it. Indifference would have been indifferent. "And, Luca, I go in great fear for the Emperor."

"Why?"

"I know no reason, only that I am in fear. I think that is why I come to you." Her eyes softened, losing their strained anxiety for an instant. "Always, when I have been in fear, you have helped—in the *atrium*, that day of the procession and, most needed of all, though you never guessed it, in my misery outside the walls of Rome. I was so solitary; I never thought to be happy in Sicily."

"And now?"

She met his eyes gravely. "Yes, I have been happy—very happy."

"Because of—the court?"

The brief pause was eloquent of suspicions not yet quieted, suspicions that might readily have bred offence. Without

doubt, his first thought had been to say, Because of the Emperor? But Bianca, a woman of plain speech at times, thought she knew the soil whence these suspicions sprang, and would not throw away a possible life's happiness for a too scrupulous prudery. There was this, too—on the morrow she might be forced to leave Capua in private, nor could she, in honour, hint the coming parting to Alvano: her mission was the Emperor's secret, not her own. Setting her natural woman's shamefacedness aside she spoke.

"Because of the court's right hand," she answered bravely, and with a smile that struggled hard for birth, but died in the struggle.

Alvano was silent, he even drew back a step, then cried suddenly, sharply, but in a voice that stammered with its surprise. "Because of me? Bianca, who am I—I never dreamed—always these last days you seemed so far and always further from me; and yet, God knows, never have I tasted such blessed happiness—never, nor knew the world held it."

"Would you have a woman tell all her secrets?" she answered, the wistful smile again finding birth in her eyes. "But now you know the greatest." Then, having told her secret, instantly, in the shrinking revulsion of her woman's nature, she strove to make as if she had not told it. "But, Luca, it was not ourselves I came to speak of—the Emperor, do you think there is harm meant?"

"No good," answered Alvano. In the confusion of his mind the shift of thought was a relief. "Somewhere there is a net spread. And yet, of all the friars I have ever met, be they grey or black, this Cornelius seemed the most honest. Trouble no more, Bianca: what harm can come to His Grace in the private chapel?"

"But," she pressed, "will you not be there?"

"And be told that if I had been wanted he would have sent for me?"

"Even so; better the risk of a sharp word than a life-long regret."

"Do you wish it, Bianca?"

"I wish what is right," she answered. "Surely the Emperor comes first—before any fear of rebuke? Rebuke? Surely we should give our very selves for his asking, when and how he pleased, and think the gift no great thing?" Out of the depth of her woman's fears, vague and unreasoning but very real, she spoke more warmly than she knew, and again Alvano was perplexed.

"Let it be so," he said curtly. "I shall be there."

He stood silent a moment and she, too, was silent. Was her secret, the greatest, the most tender, the most sacred a woman's heart can hide or whisper, to call forth no fuller, dearer, more satisfying answer? Then indeed she had misread him and shamed the shrinking of her sex in vain. Then, as if by an effort, Alvano touched her shoulder with an unsteady hand—an uncertain touch and yet a touch that lingered. "Till to-morrow," he said, nor did his voice seem more under control than his hand. "Bianca, most dear—never was a woman more dear—you have taught me what I never thought to learn; be kind when you listen to me to-morrow." The touch on her arm tightened, he even drew her nearer and stooped as if to kiss her on the forehead, but in the very act he drew back, releasing her almost roughly. "To-morrow," he repeated, "to-morrow," and he turned away, leaving her bewildered, half contented and yet half angry.

That night neither mistress nor maid was in a tolerant mood.

"Rouse you at five o'clock?" repeated Agata vexedly. "But, signorina, is a woman to get no sleep?"

"Did I hire you?" retorted Bianca. "If the service does not please you can leave it."

"And tramp afoot to Rome? There's gratitude, after all I have done to help you on your way!"

"To help me on my way?" Bianca was growing very angry. "What foolishness are you talking?"

"If it's foolishness it is your foolishness, not mine," answered the maid. "Nor even now, after almost a month, do you go the right way about it. Five o'clock indeed! Why, an hour or two under the moon and stars, with the dark of a tree at hand, are worth all these sunshine mornings in the garden. You don't know men as I know them."

"Thank God for that! But now you talk wickedness and worse than folly."

"Oh la! la! Signorina, what are you in Capua for at all? And I tell you again you go the wrong way with your five o'clock in the morning. Come now, there's a growing moon not yet set, let me send word to His Grace—"

"Be silent, you vile woman—oh! that a woman could be so vile! To-morrow I shall beseech the Countess——"

"Ah signorina, signorina, my tongue ran away with me. In the name of all the good saints forget my foolishness—yes, you were right, that is the word, my foolishness. The Countess? No, no, why should the Countess come between us? And I don't doubt it will be all right in the end. Five o'clock, signorina? Yes, yes, be sure I shall rouse you; and to-morrow, signorina mia, you will forget to-night? Old Agata was a fool, a meddling fool; is the old fool pardoned for her foolishness, signorina? No, no: say nothing to the Countess. Why should the Countess come between us? Is there aught more to-night, signorina?"

"No," said Bianca, curtly, "nothing more; you can go."

But beyond the door the tiring-woman's smoothness dropped from her like a flung-off mask. "Rob me of my reward, would you? Pack me back to Rome with my

credit lost, would you? You'll beseech the Countess? Aye, aye, but what will the Countess say to the trysts in the garden, the dalliance in the shadows? Tell me that, you hypocritical piece of pretty flesh! Oh, it's all in the sunshine! Yes, but who's there to see? Not a soul—not one! Beseech the Countess? More than Agata might go tramping back to Rome with her credit lost," and she descended the stairs in an evil mood.

That night Bianca's heart was too hot within her for much sleep. Chiefly her anger burned against Pandone—the Churchman, her father's brother, who in his greed of advancement forgot both ties of blood and vows of charity; Pandone, who not only spread a net for her, but suborned a hireling to entangle her feet. True, he had not altogether hidden the danger; almost he had warned her against it, but even while he warned he had hired this creature of Montelengo's to make assurance certain that the warning should be without effect. "What are you in Capua for at all!" Little wonder if it galled the girl, galled her bitterly, to know that if her mission to Rome on behalf of the Emperor succeeded it would be to the benefit of Giordano Pandone! Little wonder either if, when Agata, in her zeal, roused her in the blackest dark before the dawn, her eyes were heavy.

Neither spoke of the past night's sharp words. Bianca's thoughts leaped forward, not back, and the tire-woman knew too well the danger of rousing sleeping dogs. She had brought a floating wick with her, and by its miserable light, a yellow spark in the as yet black vault of night, Bianca dressed. In silence she accepted the help of her maid, and for once Agata's tongue was dumb; the unusual, to her the sinister, was afoot, and though it woke her curiosity, it cowed her. More than ever she felt the need to placate her mistress, and yet she dared not speak lest she precipitated the very evil she feared.

Dismissing the maid, Bianca waited restlessly while dawn broadened, and the tiny yellow flame of the floating wick died into insignificance. She had no clear purpose—was not even sure but that, like Alvano, she might earn the censure of a reprimand for officiousness if she approached the chapel at such a time and on such an occasion. Yet her mind was made up; even at the risk of blame she must set her fears at rest—the ringing for prime would be her warning that the time had come. And presently the bell clanged.

The private chapel was built upon the level of the first floor of the palace, beneath it being the apartments given over to the use of the officiating clergy. It was not included within the walls of the main structure, but stood apart, being approached by a covered gallery, or loggia, some thirty feet in length. Here it was that Bianca proposed to wait. Her expectation was that the Emperor would attend prime, probably without a retinue, and at the close of the short service retire to the confessional.

Her speculations were right in every particular. When she reached the gallery the chants and prayers of the office were ended; the chapel silent as if a void. But Alvano, standing midway along the gallery, was evidence that Frederick had not yet returned to the palace. Passing him with an inclination of the head she stepped lightly to the open door and looked within.

Silent, or almost silent, but not altogether empty; at least two worshippers remained at their devotions. Beyond the altar rails—the privilege of his rank in the Church—knelt Arsoli, the lights from the eastern rose window of stained glass glorious about his bowed head, while, remote from him, as if to measure the gulf between a bishop's purple and the grey robe of a simple friar, knelt Brother Cornelius. Bianca, had she knelt across the threshold, could almost have laid a hand on him, so close was he

to the door upon its left. His head was bowed on his spread palms, hiding his face, and he rocked back and forth on his knees as if moved by some fierce ecstasy of spirit, some eager yearning of petition that would take no denial. From the right, where the shadows lay thickest in the angle of the walls, came a muttered muttering without coherency or sense of sound—human voices, human speech, but speech wherein no word of priest or penitent was articulate except to the bowed ear and God. Slipping quickly across the threshold Bianca knelt on the pavement; here was peace, here the confused tongues of the world and the inward strife of spirit were alike silent and she must give God thanks. If the Franciscan heard the rustle of her skirts as she half crouched at his shoulder he gave no sign but swayed on, absorbed in the fervour of his devotion.

Truly here was peace; never had Bianca known such silence. The whispered sibilance from the confessional served only to enlarge the calm; Alvano's shifting foot on the floor of the loggia was an offence against its quietness. No words came to her lips, or even formed their conscious sense in her mind, yet never before had Bianca so uplifted spirit to spirit. It was as if the veil of flesh dissolved, and for the first time she realized and understood that nearness of the Eternal which is never far off. Then the interchange of whispered sibilances ceased; where there had been two voices there was only one and it spoke with a deeper note. It scarcely needed her own experience to tell her this was a message all the world might hear; she even caught the first words "*Ego te absolvo*," but the rest was lost as Brother Cornelius groaned bitterly within himself and spoke aloud, possibly not knowing that he spoke.

"Give me strength! Oh, God! Give me strength, Oh, Father of love! It is for Thee and Thy greater glory—a soul for my hire, Lord God—one, one, that I go not

into Thy presence empty." Then the door of the confessional creaked and in the one moment Bianca and the friar rose to their feet.

The girl stood nearer the door. Upon her, as she turned towards him, the Emperor's gaze fell first and his eyes clouded with annoyance, almost with anger. For policy's sake he had conformed, bowing himself to this law of the Church, but it vexed him that a woman should see the weakness; then he shifted to the face of the Franciscan, grey as his own hood. Frederick's eyes cleared; what mattered the weakness if it won him peace from Gregory's suspicions and respite for Sicily? The price was a small one. Dipping his finger mechanically into the *aspersorium* he formed the points of the cross upon his breast, and passed out into the sunshine.

It was then the Franciscan made his spring, driving Bianca staggering against the wall and crying "Herod! Herod!" in a voice hoarse with excitement. But the knife he had concealed in the folds of his loose frock fouled as he drew it, causing an instant's fumbling, an instant's delay and in that instant the girl recovered her balance. Her wits woke by instinct; it was intuition rather than conscious will that flung her arms round the friar's neck as at last he heaved up his weapon, and, hanging all her weight upon him, she bore him back almost through the church door again, screaming to Alvano for help as she tightened her clasp to a strangle hold. For another vital instant they swayed, battling, then Bianca saw Alvano's face, passionately fierce, across the friar's shoulder, felt the rough thrust of his hand under her arm as he caught the Franciscan by the throat.

"Stand aside—leave him to me," said Alvano between his teeth.

But now Bianca had another fear. The lean, half-naked arm threshing the air still held the knife in a clenched

fist—Luca Alvano was in danger of his life. Freeing her arm-hold she reached upward, straining to her fullest height, caught the tense wrist and with all her strength wrenched it back till for very pain the grip relaxed and the weapon fell clanging on the tessera pavement; then, breathless, she staggered to the pillared balustrade and clung to its rail, half spent with the strong emotion. Roughly, savagely, Alvano thrust the monk back into the angle beyond the chapel door and held him there, choking.

“Loose him,” said Frederick curtly; then, as Alvano hesitated, “loose him,” he repeated, “his sting’s drawn.” For a moment he stood silent, facing the Franciscan still panting for breath, a storm of strangled coughs fighting with the effort. “The spirit of the Church, if not her hand,” he said with bitter contempt. “Now, monk, the truth, if truth is in you—who suborned you to this plot?” He paused, but there was no answer, nor for the moment, was an answer possible. Brother Cornelius, limp and exhausted, half leaning against the balustrade, was tearing at the breast of his frock, groping for air. Deliberately the Emperor prolonged the pause; Arsoli was dimly to be seen crossing the floor of the church towards the open door. “A plot,” repeated Frederick, “a plot conceived in lies and baited with blasphemy——”

Then the Franciscan found speech. “No—no—you were purged—cleansed—absolved—Herod though you are the soul would not perish with the body—God would give you to me for my hire.”

“So that was the plot! You poor fool! But the lie remained?”

“Herod!” said the monk, drawing a long breath painfully, “Herod! What truth should be kept with Herod?” He drew himself up, flinging out an arm in a gesture not without dignity. “Was mine the only lie? How often have you lied to God? The Crusade? There will be no

Crusade! There can be no Crusade while Herod lives. Who is the liar, Herod the forsworn, Herod the consorter with Mahound, Herod the woman-hunter—the seducer, Herod—” he choked, coughing.

“Take him hence, Alvano,” said the Emperor, harshly, “take him hence and bid them hang him at sunset.”

But Arsoli stood framed in the church door. From the threshold he stretched out an arm across the monk’s breast.

“As God lives—no!” His face was set in defiance, his voice harsher, harder, than Frederick’s own. “He is the Church’s by benefit of clergy.”

“The Church’s? Aye, the Church’s true son in spirit—so I said,” retorted the Emperor. “But in body he is mine, and as God lives mine he shall be though Gregory’s very robe covered him. Hence with him, Alvano; you know where to find me later.”

But Arsoli, never shifting an inch, held his arm rigid. “Do you defy the Church?”

“Do you defy justice? Look what lies at your foot, Lord Bishop—the assassin’s knife! Do you claim benefit of clergy for the knife? Church or justice? As God lives, justice! Have him hence, Alvano; were his whole Order in his rope he shall hang.”

“I warn you—” began Arsoli.

“Aye, and I am warned indeed—by the knife!”

“I appeal to the Holy Father.”

“And I appeal to God!” With an effort Frederick controlled his anger. “Lord Bishop, we shall talk of this later; here is neither time nor place. Alvano, my order stands.”

There was an instant’s dramatic pause, an instant of tense danger as Alvano, reaching past Arsoli’s outstretched arm, laid his hand on the monk’s shoulder. Force—violence—might precipitate a rupture with Rome, yet behind stood Frederick, pale but determined. Then the bishop’s arm relaxed.

“You have done wrong, my son, greatly wrong,” he said, his eyes on the friar. “But the Church does not abandon her children even when they err,” then he turned on his heel and re-entered the chapel. In silence Alvano led the Franciscan into the palace.

Frederick laid a hand on Bianca’s shoulder. “I owe you a life,” he said; “it may be that before all’s ended Sicily will owe you no less. Come, there is much to be done, and great haste needed in the doing.”

CHAPTER XXVII

FOR LOVE OF THE PEOPLE

WITH brows knit, his shoulders rounded, his chin on his chest, his hands locked behind his back, Frederick descended to the garden in silence. It was characteristic of his active mental energy that already his thoughts were far from the scene of the loggia, groping after its possible consequences. How did this foiled assassination touch Sicily and the Empire? Could he, because of it, claim absolution from his oath? Or, if that was too much, could he use it as a lever, a plausible excuse, to turn aside the Crusade and force time from a reluctant Church? That was the important question and it kept him silent. It was not that he was ungrateful to Bianca Pandone, but words of thanks could wait.

Frederick was a man who thought rapidly, forcing his way without pause to a decision, let the conclusion be right or wrong. And his decision was that he could not fasten blame on the Church, could not prove a complicity which would warrant protest, and, because of the protest, delay. Against whom could he allege complicity? Arsoli? Arsoli might be trusted to keep his hands clean before the world. Gregory? Not for a moment did he associate Gregory with the monk's murderous attempt. When Gregory hurled an enemy to destruction it would be by open war, or the lightning bolt of the Church's denunciation, launched from Saint Peter's Chair. No! he could see no way to turn the attempt to his advantage.

Perhaps it was under some subtle law of contrasts, but

Bianca, as she passed down the fan of marble steps at the Emperor's side, thought she had never known the gardens so full of peace. No breath of wind stirred the leafage, the air was sweet with the perfume of the orange grove, bees by the hundred droned among the blossoms, garnering the acid-sweet honey. And in spirit she was well content. What woman, who had come through such a crowded hour, could fail to be well content?

The Emperor held Luca Alvano's passion of loyal worship, to him the Emperor was Sicily; and she had saved the Emperor's life. Frederick's obligation? She never gave a thought to Frederick's obligation. It was Luca Alvano's obligation, Luca Alvano's gratitude, Luca Alvano's praise to come that set her heart singing in tune with the Franciscan's little feathered brothers, still pouring out their matin song from the upper branches. Surely she did well to be content! Where can love find a purer gladness than to be praised by the heart of love?

At the sundial Frederick halted and, laying his arm upon the flat, faced the girl.

"The essence and message of it all is—haste. It may be I was wrong to withstand Arsoli with such heat while so much hung in the balance: his tale in Rome may be the make-weight that turns the scale against us—not wrong in justice; in justice I am right and Arsoli knows it, but wrong in policy. Bianca, we must forestall that venomous priest: you must leave for Rome without delay."

"How, Your Grace?"

Here was a swift shattering of her content, but she cried out no protest. Even while the Emperor spoke she saw the need; Gregory's permission to postpone the Crusade must be secured before Arsoli's version of that morning's doings reached him. To challenge Gregory's authority was to waken his bitter opposition to the fullest, nor would the justice of the challenge move the obstinate Pope.

"How?" he repeated. "Yes, that is the question." He relapsed into thought a moment but almost instantly roused himself, laying a hand familiarly on her shoulder. "But the way is not so clear as it was, nor so smooth. That lying monk was to have burst a barrier for us—Gregory, placated, might be complacent, now——!" With his free arm Frederick made a gesture of despair, a gesture that ended in the hand falling on Bianca's other shoulder and resting there. "Now, Bianca, after this morning's wickedness, I am afraid for you." It was then that Alvano, bidden seek the Emperor where he knew he would find him, entered the lower edge of the glade beyond the pool of Egypt and halted, seeing the two by the sundial.

"For me, Your Grace?"

"Yes: the hand that struck at me would not shrink from striking at a woman."

"The monk? But, Your Grace, Luca—your orders——"

"The monk? No, no: the monk was the tool only. The hand? Perhaps Arsoli—who knows! But in Rome—on the road to Rome, there would be no pity for a woman on such an errand as yours. Bianca, you are too dear to—Sicily——" But at the wave of colour that swept Bianca's cheeks at—as she supposed—the hinted reference to Luca Alvano Frederick shifted ground, his voice roughening. "Pity? Pity's not in them and I'll show none. The monk hangs—so much for their benefit of clergy!"

In his sudden gust of indignation the Emperor turned up the slope as if to relieve his wrath by movement, but at the pleading in the girl's voice as she answered he paused.

"Ah! Your Grace, show the poor wretch mercy: he is dying on his feet, nor can it be long—let him so die."

"Do you excuse him?"

"God forbid! But is the poor life of the poor tool worth Frederick's vengeance? I have spoken with him scores of times—the gentlest spirit, blood-brother to the little harm-

less birds. It was a madness in him—not himself. Your Grace, Your Grace, be the great Frederick of Sicily's love and pride——”

“You do love Sicily, I think?”

“Love! to my heart's blood!” The Emperor, she thought, was yielding, and in her earnestness she almost cried the words.

“Is he not guilty?”

“Have we not all sinned? Are we not forgiven as we forgive?”

“But I have sworn an oath.”

“An oath in haste, an oath in anger, an oath not to God nor to your own soul, no true man's oath—an oath wrongly taken is an oath splendid in the breaking!”

Returning, Frederick again laid a hand upon her shoulder. “Bianca, do you ask this thing of me—you—you?”

“Your Grace, let me go to His Holiness with the monk's pardon in my mouth—let me say, This is the greatness of Sicily, to lose justice in mercy, to——”

“They will say I am afraid.”

“They will say! They will say! What is that but a sneer to frighten a coward to courage, but a nothing—nothing to the man who knows and honours himself.”

“You ask it, Bianca?”

“Yes, Your Grace, I ask it—I have known the man.”

“Then take his life—you, who have given me life to-day.” Stooping he touched her forehead with his lips, then linking an arm in hers he drew her up the slope toward the further shadows while Luca Alvano, in the shade below the Egyptian pool, grit his teeth and cursed. Cursed whom? He scarcely knew, but in his wide anathema he did not spare himself.

“Ah, Your Grace,” the tremor in Bianca's voice told how deeply she was stirred, “that is your great self: now that

you have shown mercy we can hope that His Holiness will show favour."

But Frederick's mood had changed. "That grey old wolf? Bianca, I grow more afraid—there is so much at stake."

"I know it," she answered. "And I am so inadequate—I, a girl, ignorant, without skill in words to urge the need; I, so unknown, so uninstructed, without authority——" She paused, thrilled by a sudden thought. Forgetting etiquette, forgetting custom—everything but the wide, far-reaching possibilities of this new proposal, she laid a hand upon the Emperor's arm as a man might to friend and fellow-equal. At the significant familiarity, a familiarity he had never claimed or used in all his years of close association, a familiarity for which the world could find but one interpretation, Alvano groaned within himself. "Your Grace—oh, if I am a fool, pardon the folly for love's sake—why should not the Emperor himself plead—no, not plead, Frederick does not stoop to plead: why not claim yourself the right of Sicily to grow strong and great under the guidance of her king? Surely Gregory would listen; is he not the father of us all? Is not Italy his very household of love and care? And who could so move that fatherly love like you—King, Emperor, yet servant and lover of your people? Oh, Your Grace, Your Grace——"

"I?" said Frederick, blankly astonished, "I, go in state to Rome——"

"No, Your Grace, no: the form and ceremony of state would stir Gregory to a refusal: it would exalt the Church as compared with the Empire: I can see that. But why not go as I would go—in secret, and as man to man, as son to father, move His Holiness to reconsideration."

"Always," said Frederick, "I have thought you sane—saner than many men or any woman I have known, but now you are mad, utterly mad."

"Still sane, my King—since I am all Sicilian, Frederick, and Frederick only, is my King. Is it danger that you fear: not craven fear, but the care and guardianship a leader must have of himself for his people's sake? But you yourself have said Gregory, grey old wolf though he may be, is not one to strike except openly and as Pope. Fear, then, by the road? But here in your own palace, at the very door of God's house, the threat menaced your life. What greater fear could there be on the road? And what is it, Capua to Rome and Rome to Capua? Five days, riding as men can ride, six at the most? If the Emperor should be absent six days on Sicily's business who dares question it? Della Vigna and Luca would fence their questioners and ask no questions themselves."

Carried away by her enthusiasm she had poured out her words in a torrent; now she paused for objection. But none came. Not once nor twice Frederick had been absent, and the discreet, knowing his Orientalism, had asked no questions: the Emperor, they guessed, was not alone in his seclusion, nor was what occupied him the business of Sicily. When he spoke again the Emperor no longer called her mad: rather he parleyed with her, posed difficulties: that is to say he did not answer with a flat no!

"But in Rome? The Emperor cannot knock, even at the Pope's door, to beg an audience. Besides, need must that the secret be absolute."

"And what is my uncle, Pandome, for, but to play go-between—and make something for himself out of both sides, if I know him aright!"

"But who could approach Pandone?"

"I, Your Grace, I, who would ride with you."

"You?" cried Frederick, as if he doubted his hearing.

"Why not, your Grace? Where all Sicily trusts, aye, and all the Empire, why not I?"

For a moment Frederick stood in silence, looking down

into the warm-brown eyes that met his so fearlessly, so trustfully, so tranquilly, and yet with a greatness of purpose clear in their depths; then, very soberly, he stooped, and for the second time touched her forehead with his lips.

"God be thanked for good women," he said solemnly. "Now, Bianca, my sister, be silent and let me think." In the lower shadows, Luca Alvano, watching, almost wept for rage.

There was much need for thought. The fate of half the world might turn on his decision. Was this the madness he had called it? No; looked at more deeply it was no more madness than any great idea the world at first sight fails to understand, and so condemns with unthinking contempt. Of such madresses progress is made: that Luca Alvano should climb to St. Peter's chair for the welding together of Italy into a national whole was such another splendid madness. Danger? Personal danger there was none. Gregory was a man of the sternest probity; narrow, except in his conception of Church rights and there a bigot, but that he should degrade the sacred dignity of his holy office by private violence to a man who trusted him was unthinkable.

On the other hand there was the possibility that Gregory, with his tremendous conception of the dignity and power of the Popedom, might be the very type to be won over by the secret appeal. Men love to have their power admitted, here was a confession of the Church's strength, the Church's power, as Arsoli had put it, to bless or curse. And Giordano Pandone was just the man to play broker between Church and Empire—already the Church and Gregory owed him a debt: could Gregory refuse his offices? As to the Empire—Pandone would know the day must come, might come very speedily, when the friendship of the Empire would have its value in the Conclave. As to his week's absence from Capua in secret, Bianca was right—della

Vigna and Alvano would ask no questions, and could be trusted to hold curiosity at arm's length.

"Yes," he said slowly, "yes, it might be done."

"Not might but shall, Your Grace."

"But you? How could you ride as men ride? I mean in speed, in endurance, in facing hardship and fatigue?"

"I would strive hard to be no drag, no hindrance."

"Bianca, Bianca, how you must love Sicily!"

"Yes," she assented, very quietly, her thoughts going to Luca Alvano, "Yes, I love with all my heart and soul."

"I must think again." This time the pause was briefer. "Pandone? Are you sure of Pandone?"

"Yes, Your Highness, since it is to his interest. Does he not secure the powerful backing of the Empire?"

The Emperor laughed and Bianca breathed freer: the tension was relaxing now that Frederick could laugh as of old.

"Perhaps," he answered, "but it depends in part on Gregory and in part on Alvano."

"On His Holiness and Luca?"

"Capua has its secrets as well as Rome! Once Alvano is a priest——"

"Luca a priest?" For the moment there was only astonishment in her voice, incredulity, incomprehension, a doubt whether she had caught the words aright.

"You think he has no vocation? Not the very highest, perhaps; not spiritual devotion, but the next best—love for the people."

"Love for—the people? Luca, a priest? I can't understand."

"No, how could you, not knowing what impels him. Some might call it another madness, but not I. It was his own proposing. We have kept it a secret between us, but you have earned the right to share the secret. It was a great thought, the greatest in the world. Alvano will

become a priest and strive to climb to Peter's chair that he and I, working together, may raise Italy above her factions and set her in her proper place among the nations. For that Sicily must be strong; as you said, there is much at stake—more than you imagined."

"More than I imagined—the greatest thought in the world—Luca, a priest." With a brain still numb she echoed the phrases with the dull reiteration of incomprehension. "Luca, a priest?" she repeated more warmly; then broke out, "how long, Your Grace, has this great purpose been Luca's goal in life?"

"He went to Rome to further it."

"He went to Rome to further it?" Rapidly her mind worked backward. There, in the *atrium*—at the house of Susanna Ligorio—when he joined Ursula Crescenzo's litter outside the walls of Rome—as he rode by her side through the long, bright days of Sicily's glorious April, he had been priest in all but name: a priest devoted though not already vowed. True, he had never said, I love you! No! he had spared her that infamy. But he had let her slip aside her woman's mask of modest reticence, laying bare her heart, and that itself was an infamy in a priest. At the memory the girl grew hotly passionate and passionately hot—a woman to avow her love to a priest! what shame could be greater in her, or infamy in him? Suddenly she laughed, but not as Bianca Pandone should.

"Surely, Your Grace, that ends all doubt? Where he went to further his priesting let us go also. And there is much need for haste: you yourself have said so. Let us ride out to-day—this very hour."

"Bianca, have you considered——"

"Your Grace, do I matter—have I ever mattered? No! never! Not for an hour! Sicily first and Sicily last—Sicily always, but I never understood it as I do now."

"Men will talk——"

"Let them talk! My soul is my own, no man can touch it! Your Grace, already Arsoli may have men on the way to Rome—there is great need for haste, great need to leave Capua."

"Then in God's name let us go! Never was there a braver woman, never a more selfless, never one more staunch to her love." Lifting her hand he touched it with his lips. "Have no fear, Bianca, my sister."

"I never had fear," she answered; "Your Grace, I will keep my chamber till I hear from you; but, oh, let there be no delay—I am sick to be on the road to Rome."

"In two hours," he said. "Sooner is impossible; I must see della Vigna or Alvano."

"I shall be waiting: already my heart is out of Capua."

"In two hours," he repeated, and turned away in the direction of the private door.

Until Frederick disappeared, hidden by a thicket bordering a side path, Bianca lingered among the upper shadows; then, and in haste, she turned down the slope whereon stood the sundial. Bred among the peasants of Malazzorbo her instincts were largely primitive: she was wounded to the quick—not to the death, she was of too robust and wholesome a nature for such a hurt to be a death-wound—and the primitive in her bade her find the comforting power of solitude where she might nurse her hurt: the two hours of inaction would be passed in her own chamber, alone with God's pity.

But Alvano met her, barring her passage with outstretched hands. Before he spoke she guessed his thoughts from the square set of his mouth, from the storm in his eyes: at the tower of Stephani Petri his passion had been hot, but never such passion as the strong light of the morning picked out on his changed face.

"Oh!" he cried, "accursed blood of the Pandoni to turn a Caldora wanton because an Emperor beckoned!"

"A lie!" she flashed back, her eyes as stormy, her anger as rough-throated as his own.

"A lie? Am I blind?"

"No! It is I who am blind—I who mistook the cunning of a priest for the faith of a simple gentleman."

He winced at the gentle gibe bitterly delivered but let it pass unanswered, too intent on what, to him, was a greater matter.

"Bianca, are you not in Sicily for this very thing?"

"What very thing?"

"To snare the Emperor to the profit of Rome."

"Yes," she answered, looking him unflinchingly in the eyes, "yes, what then?"

"And you have succeeded while I—all the while I worshipped you——"

"You worshipped *me*? You! You, a priest! By what right?"

He let the question pass as he had let the gibe; indeed, the question was in a sense a gibe as bitter as the last and as barbed.

"And you—ah! dear God! What have you given in return?"

"Are you already a priest that I should make confession to you?" she mocked. Then she grew colder. "Stand to one side; henceforth I go my way—do you go yours, wherever it may lead you."

She was magnificent as she swept past him, magnificent in her scorn, magnificent in her passionate beauty, magnificent in her straight carriage and strength of indignant youth. Magnificent, too, in her self control: Agata, meeting her mistress in the corridor, thought she had never seen her so much a woman of Capua's great world, so much a dominant part of the palace life. There, the maid told herself, there went success. But with the door bolted fast between her and the eyes of the world nature claimed the

victory. Her firm, imperious will snapped like a hollow reed, her joints loosened under her, and she sank upon the floor in a heap against the nearest couch, weeping as she had not wept even when her mother died.

Two hours later she rode out of Capua by the north gate, and if she was paler than nature none made comment. Nor was it thought strange that Frederick went unattended. Court ceremony never bound the Emperor; in all such things he was a law unto himself.

What happened thereafter may be told in few sentences.

The afternoon was far advanced when Alvano learned the news of the Emperor's absence from della Vigna, and not till an hour later was Bianca's name whispered about the palace. Then Ursula di Crescenzo questioned Agata, Crescenzo and Alvano being present, and the tire-woman, frightened and malicious, told all she knew, suppressing her own original deception, but adding, after the habit of her kind, her evil surmises as if they, too, were knowledge. Silently she was listened to, briefly further questioned, curtly bidden go: then Ursula turned to her husband.

"A plot behind your back! What did I tell you on your way from Rome? Watch the girl! If there is a woman in all Sicily who knows whether the Crusade will sail I wager it is Bianca Pandone."

Promptly Alvano also turned upon Crescenzo, his hand significantly on his sword hilt. "The lady is my cousin," he said. "Being a woman the signora, your wife, is privileged. Do you, lord count, who are a man, adopt her foul suggestion?" His voice was rough with the will to offend as his sore heart leaped at the hope that inaction was done with: here was one not too great to be called to account. That Crescenzo was innocent of blame mattered nothing.

Fortunately Crescenzo was cool in his self control, fortunately, too, he was secure in his reputation for courage;

also, he recognized the true root of Alvano's willingness to give insult.

"But I, too, though a man, claim privilege," he answered smiling, but with grave eyes. "Am I not His Holiness's envoy?" Then he laid a hand on Alvano's shoulder. "Almost I am old enough to be your father—aye, more than almost. No woman should spoil a man's life. If she is a good woman she will not, come what may; if a bad, she's not worth it. Alvano of the Arno ford, do your man's work in the world: God knows your kind is needed." And Luca Alvano had the sense to take and grip the hand held out to him.

Through the hours of a wakeful night he turned the injunction over in his mind, Do your man's work in the world. And coupled with it was Bianca's last hard-flung farewell, Henceforth I go on my own way—do you go yours, wherever it may lead you. In essence the two were one: a man's true way in the world is doing the world's work to the best that is in him, no matter where it may lead. The world? For him the world was more than ever Sicily, and if his work for Sicily led through sacrifice it was his work none the less—more, rather, since by sacrifice a man may win redemption from despair.

With the first of the morning he rode north for Rome and the laying on of hands for the priesthood.

CHAPTER XXVIII

NORTHWARD TO ROME

So long as they were within view of Capua the Emperor and Bianca rode slowly, nor even when the city was hidden did they push their horses at any great pace. With such a length of journey before them it was clearly their wisdom to hasten slowly and so conserve their beasts' strength that there should be no floundering by the way.

While still in the streets of Capua, and passing the gates, they had talked gaily as at other times, but once in the open country, where it was no longer necessary to play a part, they fell silent by mutual consent. And they had cause for silence. Frederick, whether he knew it or not, was throwing for the greatest stake of his life, while Bianca had already played her cast and lost. Her purpose was quite settled in her mind; she would aid the Emperor to the utmost in Rome, see him safely beyond the walls on his return, then go back to Malazzorbo—Cosimo Rivara, an honourable gentleman, would keep his word and make it easy for her: Tita Sirano's warm heart of loyal, patient love would grow glad with her coming.

But Bianca, being country bred, had that memory for a path once travelled which belongs to the peasant, and presently she drew her rein.

"Your Grace, we came from Rome by the road on the right."

"Yes, but we go by that on the left. It is the shorter. It runs through the Maritima and is the quicker where there is no litter. Do you trust me?"

"Would I be here if I did not?" she answered and rode on.

"Thank God for that! And Bianca, let there be no more 'Your Grace,' since we are brother and sister."

That night their quarters were at the Locanda del Gallo in Trayetto. Nowhere in her ride through the Marches with Rivara had Bianca found so wretched an inn. But though the sole supper it could provide was a mess of fish cooked in oil neither complained; Frederick, indeed, made a jest of the discomforts, as a soldier might of the hardships of a campaign—they are part of the day's work. There was but one sleeping chamber: it was given over to Bianca, the Emperor passing the night on a settle in the common room.

Thence, with the same dawn that saw Alvano quit Capua, they rode out for Fondi. Here, again, was a new world for Bianca had she but had the spirit to enter in and possess it. Such-like spurs of hills, now wooded, now arid and stony, as strayed down from the east she knew of old; but the blue waters to the west, waters storm-whipped by a keen mistral to a turmoil of tossing crests that broke in creamy white patches against the vivid sapphire, to form again and roll thundering on the shore, she had neither seen before nor dreamed of. Faintly the beauty and the newness stirred her; but if her eyes brightened under the cool, searching buffet of the salt-laden wind they dulled again even while the smell of the brine was in her nostrils. Frederick said nothing, but he squared his shoulders and filled his lungs greedily, as a man who is a man and loves the wild freedom of the sea will at such a time.

At Fondi they dined. Thence the road rose steeply, climbing through a hill pass by such a zig-zag ascent of abrupt turns that it was easy to understand why Marco di Crescenzo, with a litter in charge, had chosen the longer route from Rome. At the crest of the ridge Frederick halted.

"Terracina," he said, pointing to a cluster of grey houses

straggling up the slope of the coast line to the left. "That ruin above it is a temple of Venus, and from the summit of that hill beyond, Monte Circes, one can catch a hint of Rome—the cross of St. Peter's." Presently, at the foot of the hill, he spoke again. "This is the ancient Via Appia—Rome's handiwork everywhere! Pray God I keep that hand off Sicily."

At Piperno they made no halt but pushed on through a wooded country to Sezze, the Pontine Marshes stretching on their left almost to the sea. It was not, perhaps, "riding as men ride," but already Bianca had grown pinched and white, and Frederick dared not try her strength more severely lest nature fail. She had ridden from Malazzorbo to Rome with less distress, but now the burden of the spirit bore heavily on the flesh.

Again the lodgings were wretched and both found the roughness of the road, as they took horse in the early light, a relief from the night's miseries. The Marshes were still upon their left, a weary monotony merging into the Maremma, until at Cisterna there came a welcome change. There they halted for the mid-day meal. Sicily had long since been left behind for the Patrimony of Saint Peter.

"It is the ancient Tres Tabernae," said Frederick speaking of the town, "Tres Tabernae, where Rome sent out to welcome holy Paul—whom presently it slew! God grant that my appeal to Cæsar may be happier."

"Then it was Nero——" began Bianca, but Frederick interrupted her.

"And I am no Paul: the parallel is unprofitable." Nevertheless, the parallel stuck in both their minds.

The inn was vastly different from any they had met with upon their journey, possibly because Romans still came thus far along the Appian Way to greet their friends. It was to the host himself that Frederick paid the reckoning: like all innkeepers the man loved a gossip.

"For Rome, signor?"

"For Rome," assented the Emperor. "What news of the city? We are from the south."

"And have ridden far—no offence, signor?"

"Far: our baggage train is on the road."

"Oh, signor, that is no affair of mine, but——" and the host paused, pushing the coins hither and thither on the table doubtfully.

"But?" repeated Frederick civilly, and waited.

"I know a man's tongue may earn him more than his pay," said the landlord, "but there is the signora to be thought of. Signor, if I were you I would push on and enter the city in good daylight or sleep outside the walls: the Aquila Nero is a good house."

"Why?"

"Signor, you understand it is no affair of mine, and in my trade we hear all sides. Of the rights of it I know nothing, but they say Rome is——" he paused, jingling the silver, "restless, signor, restless."

"Why?" repeated Frederick.

"No offence either way, signor, but they say the Holy Father has a heavy hand, and the Romans—well, Romans are Romans."

"And you think good daylight——"

"Is wisest, for the signora's sake, when the streets are in a turmoil: yes, signor. My cousin's house, the Aquila Nero——"

"Oh, it is your cousin's house?"

The landlord looked Frederick fairly in the face. "No, signor, that's not the reason." He paused again, pushing out a doubtful lip, then added, "I've heard said there's been murder done—now if you know Rome you know as much as I do."

"Murder? But in Rome there's a murder every week?"

"Not such murder as this, signor. I can say no more."

"Thanks for your warning, my friend." The Emperor nodded, and, deep in thought, joined Bianca.

Yes, he knew Rome and he knew Gregory. When flint strikes steel sparks must fly. Helped by Alvano's reports and his own knowledge it was not difficult to guess at what had happened—the imperious, Church-proud spirit of the Pope had wearied of scattering donatives among a people never to be satisfied; Rome had grumbled, clamouring, and grown so insistent in its discontent that Gregory, moved by the same spirit, had flung censures even more lavishly than he had largesse, and then Rome had been Rome—there had been murder done; probably, Frederick thought, the Papal Guard had suffered.

Without hesitation he told Bianca of the warning and his own surmises; they rode as comrades and she had an equal right to the knowledge.

"The horses are too tired for haste," he ended. "In any case when Rome is on the prowl a broadening day is safer than a falling dusk."

"Oh, Your Grace," she cried, a spot of colour reddening her cheeks, "there is danger and I have led you into it."

"Danger? No! Not to me. The louder they curse Gregory the faster they would fly to my help if I called 'God and the Empire!' as Alvano did on the day of the procession. You heard him?"

"Yes," she answered, her emotion dying, chilled and killed by the mention of Alvano's name, "yes, I heard him."

Full of his own thought Frederick laughed. "God and the Empire! What will Rome say when it hears that cry in a Pope's mouth! A great thought, the very greatest: Alvano's own thought, too. And yet, it is strange, but he had grown cold upon it when he returned from Rome, so cold that I challenged him that very night—was there a

woman? the one woman in the world whose love would be greater than the greatest? But—he said no.”

“No,” said Bianca, still stonily, “I suppose there was no woman.”

This time the Emperor’s attention was roused. Trained from his youth to read the subtle inflexions of a voice as indications of the hidden spirit, his ear had caught a meaning in the cold level of the girl’s tone, and he glanced across at her. She sat very erect, her head held high, her face set like marble, her eyes fixed straight before her.

No woman? But, Frederick asked himself, could she have said there was no man? What a ring of unbelief, of protest, had been in her cry, Luca Alvano a priest? a cry repeated again and again; pain, keen pain, the pain of a mortal hurt was clearer with every repetition. At the moment, preoccupied with his own uncertainties, he had given the cry no heed, but now it came back to him in its growing poignancy, Luca Alvano, a priest!

And other memories crowded in for confirmation of the cry’s significance. She had known Alvano in Rome, had travelled with him to Capua, spent the warm spring days in his company: where Bianca Pandone was there also was Alvano. Cousins? Had she found more than cousinship? found it without seeking it, as such things are best found? found it not knowing Alvano had pledged himself to the priesthood for Sicily’s sake? That would account for her eager haste to leave Capua within the hour, that would account for many things—that she was now all Sicilian, for one, though she had come from Rome on the Church’s errand.

But when he looked a second time her face had changed. The set stoniness had melted and there was colour in the marble, though she still looked straight before her between her horse’s ears. There was life, too, in her voice.

“Luca was pledged to silence?”

"Yes."

"Before even he went to Rome?"

"Yes."

"And," this time the question came stumblingly, "he was more doubtful on his return?"

"Yes, more than doubtful—unwilling."

"Thank you, I think I understand now." For a moment she paused, uncertain whether or not she would speak her mind; then she added, very deliberately, "Your Grace, if a Pope ever cries, God and the Empire, he will not be Luca Alvano."

"In God's name, why not?" cried Frederick, startled.

"Because Luca Alvano is an honourable gentleman! How, then, could he sell the Church to the Empire? Giordano Pandone might, but never Luca Alvano! The higher he climbs the clearer he will see that he cannot—but he will still be a priest." The voice that had risen to a note of triumph died away, and the last words ended in a whisper as if she spoke to herself alone.

Frederick rode on in silence. Back came Frangipani's prophecy, There will never be a Ghibelline Pope! Back, too, came his own estimate of Gregory, that from the height of Saint Peter's Chair he would have a changed vision. With that shrewdness he had always admired Bianca had put her finger on the inherent weakness of the scheme: strip the greatness from the conception and it left naked a betrayal of the Church's ideals—could Alvano betray the Church that set her crown upon his head? To that Bianca answered an emphatic no!

But what, he wondered, had sharpened the girl's insight into Alvano's character? Love? But love is blind, here was clear vision: and yet at times it is the world that is blind, and love alone has eyes to see. But that is when the thing to be discovered is spiritual. He pushed the question home as only he might.

"Bianca, what is Luca Alvano to you?"

She turned on him passionately, almost fiercely, "By what right——"

"By a double right," he interrupted, "by the right of a friend to both, and also as—but I do not wish to press the second."

But the girl's answer showed that she understood. "Your Highness, Luca is my cousin."

"And nothing more?"

"Can a priest be more?" she answered bitterly.

"Three days ago what was he—before you knew he was a priest-to-be?"

The hardness melted as her eyes grew soft and wistful. "The truest gentleman—and he is so still. Too true for my peace."

Frederick probed no deeper. Nor was there need: the self-revelation was sufficient. But one thing he asked himself—If Alvano were questioned again, after these weeks in Sicily, would he still say there was no woman?

CHAPTER XXIX

ROME STRIKES BACK

THAT night they lay in comfort at the Aquila Nero, half an hour's ride from the San Giovanni gate. The inn thrived, Frederick judged, chiefly upon two classes—belated travellers who failed to reach the city before the closing of the gates, and jovial Romans who for six months of the year ventured thus far to dine or sup away from the stifling air and heat of Rome's narrow streets.

That night there was none of the former, and with the closing in of dusk the latter returned to the city. But though thus left the sole guests of the inn, Frederick did not find the host communicative. Perhaps living nearer to the heavy hand of both Pope and Senator had taught him caution. As his cousin had said, A man's tongue may earn more than his pay. Riots? No, he had heard of no rioting. Discontent?

"Ah, signor," he protested, fencing the question, "is there such a thing as content anywhere in the world! Here is the Aquila Nero empty, save for the signora and your honourable self—does that make for content!"

"But your cousin spoke of murder?"

The landlord spread out his hands in appeal. "Murder?" he echoed, still in protest. "I ask you, signor, in a city like Rome may there not be murders and I know nothing of them?"

"Then Rome is tranquil?"

"Tranquil as usual, signor." And with that ambiguity

Frederick had to be satisfied, conscious all the while that the answer was as double-edged as any ancient oracle.

There are many silences—the grim silence of despair, of sorrow without words, of unutterable joy; silences where life is at its emptiest; silence where it is too full for speech. Bianca could not have told which of these weighed dumbly on her, the fulness of memory or the emptiness of the days to come, as she rode out on the final stage of her journey, but with the spires and towers of Rome clear in the morning light she had no heart for many words.

Nor was the Emperor more inclined to talk. Since leaving Capua he had spoken little, and now as events drew to a decision his mind was full of the crisis which must culminate within the next few hours. Delay in Rome was dangerous, too dangerous for prolonged negotiation to be possible; a single interview with Gregory must force a decision. The Pope was himself too high-minded to condescend to violence, but in blind unreason some fanatic might strike and succeed where one had already struck and failed; a single day behind the walls of Rome was the limit of prudence.

Where the highway forked, leading on the left to the Porta Latina and on the right to the gate of San Giovanni, Frederick halted. Which branch should they follow? Unhesitatingly Bianca chose the latter. It led, she remembered, past the Lateran where she had said farewell to Emilia; thence, with her peasant's intuition for roads once traversed, she could find her way to the Pandone palace; to avoid questioning was their wisdom.

And now, his soldier's instinct fully roused, the Emperor threw off his preoccupation. It was not his first visit by several to the Eternal City, but he had never so approached it.

In Rome there were elements which always must be antagonistic; elements which might set the good faith of the Pope at defiance. Just because delay in the city was

dangerous it was necessary he should know his line of retreat. Therefore he noted every land-mark, every turn of the road, fixing them and their order in his memory.

"What church is that?" he asked.

Bianca paused before answering. Even while he spoke her eyes had been on the curious tall, yet slender, square tower which served both as spire and campanile, or, rather, on the lance imposed upon its cross in symbol of the saint's martyrdom. Cosimo Rivara had pointed it out from the brow of the hill the night she first saw Rome. Now the church had a significance which then had passed her by.

"It is San Tommaso," she said at last.

"San Tommaso?" Alvano had spoken of San Tommaso, and the Emperor searched his memory. "Yes, I remember now; the Church of the Vigils? I wonder why the Church of the Vigils is San Tommaso?"

"Perhaps it is only after much doubt, and many searchings of heart, that men dare say *Dominus meus et Deus meus*," she answered, her voice steadily under control as she quoted the inscription above the great doorway; then she rode on.

They passed the gates with no more serious challenge than a close scrutiny, but Frederick's experience told him that the guards were increased beyond the normal watchfulness of ever watchful Rome. If there had been no riot as yet there was evident unrest, and Angelo di Benincasa, the senator, would invite no turbulence by any show of weakness.

And the further they pushed into the city these signs of vigilant precaution and the need for them increased. At every crossed street, in every open space such as the Piazza of San Clemente or beneath the walls of the Colosseum, soldiers of the Republic were in force; while up its narrow lanes, in its dens and rookeries, its hidden plague-spots of vice and wretchedness, Rome buzzed like an angry hive.

Riots? Perhaps none as yet. Discontent? Without the shadow of a doubt. Frederick read the signs in grim satisfaction. With sedition seething to outbreak at his doors Gregory might more readily make terms with the Empire.

Beyond the Capitoline the crowd had so increased in the streets that to ride abreast was impossible. Naturally, Frederick pushed to the front to force a passage, and Bianca, following, could not but admire his unfailing self-control. Jostled and impeded at every step, sometimes of necessity, sometimes in provocation, he never once lost his temper, but threaded his way through the shifting, sullen, loosely-packed mob with an easy good humour that won advance where arrogance or curt command must have ended in disaster.

As they approached the Via Paparone the crowd sensibly thinned, and the leavening of soldiery, mingled now with men of the Papal Guard, just as sensibly increased, until, entering the street itself, they found the passage absolutely barred by armed men. Here they were challenged in earnest, but while Frederick parleyed Bianca heard her name called from further up the street and saw Jacopo hastening towards them.

"Ah, signorina, signorina," he cried, as, the barrier broken, the horses moved forward again, "what misfortune brings you to Rome at such a time? But follow on, while I go and tell Signor Cosimo of your coming."

Bianca turned to the Emperor. "Misfortune? Why misfortune?"

But Frederick shook his head. "See," he said, "there is a second guard blocking the further end of the street. I fear Rome is at odds with the Cardinal."

"Then it is 'Sandro's doing; 'Sandro is always so hot-headed." It was then that Rivara joined them, and, full of her thought, Bianca waited for no greeting but cried "'Sandro! It is 'Sandro!"

"Yes," said Rivara gravely, "it is 'Sandro." Then his gaze shifted to Frederick and he started.

"'Sandro!" she repeated, "what has 'Sandro done?"

"Oh, you mistake," said Rivara, "you mistake; 'Sandro is dead."

"'Sandro? 'Sandro dead?"

"Murdered?" It was Frederick who broke in, remembering the landlord's warning at Cisterna and drawing his inference.

"Murdered, Your Highness." The three were alone, midway between the living barrier drawn across the street and the group of guards clustered round the arched doorway of the palace, and Rivara's voice, low-pitched, reached none but themselves.

"You know me then?"

"I was in San Germano with the Cardinal, Your Highness."

"Your Grace may trust Signor Rivara as you would Luca Alvano; Sicily has no truer gentleman," said Bianca. "But 'Sandro! Oh, poor 'Sandro and poor Emilia! Signor Rivara, tell us——"

"Not here or now."

"Yes, here and now," said Frederick, speaking with his old imperious authority. "There are larger issues at stake than a Roman murder, though the dead man be Alessandro Pandone. The guards? Let them stare; what more natural than that you should tell the news. When did this happen?"

"Four days ago, Your Grace."

"Forget that I am His Grace, you have my leave. As you can see, I am not in Rome as the Emperor. Why was murder done?"

"A month ago," Rivara glanced up at Bianca, "the very day we arrived from Malazzorbo, some of the wild youths of the city——"

"Alessandro Pandone amongst them?"

"Alessandro Pandone amongst them," and very briefly Rivara told the story of the drowning of Luigi Luti. "It was a foolish prank—hot blood that gives no thought to consequences, not evil for evil's sake. But Luti died, and because the foolish lads trooped here for sanctuary, the mob's memory fastened on Alessandro. Besides, he gave them cause to remember. Then His Holiness——"

"Yes?" said Frederick, as Rivara paused. "His Holiness?"

"His Holiness told Rome some plain truths, and Rome, remembering the death of Luti, struck back through the man who had put Gregory where he is. The lad was waylaid——"

"Let the rest be," said Frederick peremptorily. He had heard enough for his guidance. "Take the signorina to her cousin, then return to me. I will wait you in some private room of the palace."

"And my uncle?"

"Say nothing to your uncle until I have talked with Signor Rivara. But remember, private grief must give way to the public need. That which we came to do in Rome must be done."

In an ante-room of the guard-house Frederick paced up and down, waiting Rivara's return. Weighed carefully, the fall of events did not displease him. Death and Rome, two tremendous allies who knew each other of old, fought on his side. With the astute comprehension of the statesman, the man who thinks in nations and computes life by generations, he brushed aside surface appearances and saw Alessandro Pandone's murder in its true significance—not the wild justice of a mob's vengeance for a lad's fatal folly, but a turbulent, discontented people striking upward in its sullen passion, striking as high as it dared, striking at the Cardinal because it dared not strike at the Pope, striking the son because it dared not strike the father, but all the

while aiming its blow at the dominance of the Church. Surely, more than ever, Gregory would desire peace in Sicily.

On Rivara's return Frederick lost no time before putting his conclusions to the test.

"Signor Rivara, in these last weeks I have come to respect a woman's opinion as never before; that she tells me I may trust her is enough. No! add no protests; her word, I say, is enough." He paused a moment, considering, then went on. "Her assurance means that, first of all, you are faithful to bread and salt. If that were not so, how could you be faithful to me—a stranger? Signor Rivara, as a Christian man I pledge my word that nothing I shall ask you is against your master's interests nor the interests of His Holiness."

"Ask on, Your Grace."

The Emperor smiled. The laconism pleased him doubly; it was so much to the point and it so unreservedly accepted his good faith.

"This Luti, when was he drowned?"

"The very day his late Holiness died."

"And young Pandone has gone freely about the streets of Rome ever since?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"And until four days ago Rome raised no hand against him? Why?" But though Rivara accepted the Emperor's disclaimer of hostility without demur, he conceived it no part of his duty to formulate theories which implied censure, whether of the Cardinal, His Holiness, or Rome itself; therefore he remained silent, and Frederick went on, putting his point more plainly: "The lad's murder; which was it in your opinion, revenge for Luti's drowning, or Rome's warning that it resented the Pope's truths?"

"In part both," answered Rivara slowly; "but I think had Alessandro not been his father's son he would have been alive to-day."

"And his father is son to the Church, with Gregory father of us all! If I know anything of Gregory this may lose his Eminence favour at the Vatican."

Promptly Rivara prevaricated, perhaps because of his faithfulness to bread and salt. "Your Grace, would that count with a father whose son lies dead?"

"When the father is Giordano Pandone," began the Emperor; but without ceremony Rivara cut short the censure.

"Your Grace, Emilia is my promised wife."

At the unaccustomed interruption Frederick had stiffened. Now recognising the spirit which had prompted it he held out his hand frankly. "And you can listen to nothing but good of her father? Nor shall you. Son-in-law to His Eminence? No! I mean no disparagement, but I had thought the Cardinal looked higher than a simple gentleman, higher, and perhaps worse. It is common knowledge that he had ambitions."

"Four days ago shook them," answered Rivara gravely.

"And love was borne out of death—no, not love, but the crowning of love? It is the greatest thing in the world, Signor Rivara; happy are they who find it, let the crowning come how it may. Now, for Bianca's sake, I will give you a hint—marry while the cool fit is on the Cardinal."

"But, Your Grace——"

"You have been frank with me, as man to man; now I shall be frank with you. My purpose in Rome may bring back the Vatican favour to Pandone, may even make more assured the Cardinal's hopes for the future; if so, will he hold to his promise? Will he still be content with a simple gentleman?" Frederick paused, then went on grimly: "It is also true it may damn him utterly, but if it does it will tear down greater things than a Cardinal. What is his mood?"

"But, Your Grace——"

"Death of my life, man!" broke in Frederick impatiently. "Here am I meeting you on equal ground and you answer me with ifs and buts! There's more at stake than you or your Cardinal. Buts! buts! buts! Caution can be too cautious. And to what end? In five minutes with him I'll know his moods from end to end, so have done with your buts."

For a moment Rivara stiffened as the Emperor had done, then, and almost instantly, he recognised the justice of Frederick's outburst; recognised, too, that he claimed no more than the truth when he said he could sift Pandone for himself, if so driven.

"It shifts with the minutes, Your Grace; rage, despair, tears, resentment——"

"Resentment against whom?"

"His Holiness—the Church, even sometimes against Fate itself, I think."

Frederick was silent. With Alvano's report fresh in his memory there was no need to probe deeper. Gregory had spoken plain truths to more than Rome—Alessandro Pandone's criminal folly had cast a stain upon the Church, and the Cardinal's resentment was for the censure which endangered his own succession. Lay the Church under an obligation and be secure, Montelengo had said. But now disgrace threatened. All that the Emperor understood. The deduction was clear—there might be tears, there might be despair, but the death of the son had not killed the ambitions of the father.

"Take me to him," said Frederick. But midway up the broad marble stairway, with its borderings of garish brasses and mock antique sculptures, he paused to lay a hand on Rivara's arm. "My friend, I warn you that my purpose in Rome may change many things—from the face of the world to the Cardinal's mind; if you are wise you will marry to-day."

“With death in the house?”

Frederick turned up the stairs. “Let the living be served. Life is warm substance, not a flicker of shadows. If the dead understand they will forgive, if they do not—” A fluttering gesture of his hand completed the sentence. What the dead do not understand cannot hurt them.

And behind a closed door they passed upon their way. Emilia lay like a child in Bianca’s mothering arms, crying out her woman’s heart in a passion of tears which were not all born of sorrow.

“Oh, the cruel, cruel cowards! My poor ’Sandro! How shall I live without ’Sandro! I loved him so—loved him—loved him—loved him.”

“But not as you love Cosimo.”

The arms clipping Bianca round tightened their clasp, and Emilia looked up, a light in her eyes through the falling tears. “Bianca, my father knows—he says I may marry Cosimo. Perhaps if they had not killed ’Sandro my father would never—oh, I am wicked to say that. But I do not mean what you think.”

“Dear,” said Bianca, taking the tear-stained face between her palms, a face pitifully small and white, but sweet and winning even in its stark misery, “I think nothing but that Cosimo is Cosimo. Do you love ’Sandro less because you love Cosimo more? Thank God from the depths of your heart for a love that can cure loss, and that is stronger than death.”

CHAPTER XXX

CARDINAL PANDONE IS PERSUADED

BEFORE a further door on the same corridor Rivara paused; but with his hand raised to knock Frederick stayed him.

"Save His Holiness I ask no man's leave to enter. Announce me, neither more nor less, then go."

Without hesitation Rivara obeyed. Drawing the latch-string he pushed open the door, entered and stood aside for Frederick to pass. Then he said, very quietly, "His Highness, the Emperor, Your Eminence," and slipping behind Frederick drew the door shut behind him.

At the click of the latch Pandone, ceasing his uneasy walk up and down the room, turned, ready to voice his anger at the unpermitted disturbance. But even before Rivara spoke he recognized his visitor, and in his astonished surprise the rebuke froze unspoken. Where he had halted, there he stood, slack and irresolute, one hand mechanically playing with the roots of his beard below his mouth.

Nor did Frederick speak until the door was shut, but walked leisurely on, his shrewd eyes searching the Cardinal's troubled face. Then, with Rivara shut outside the room, he stretched out both hands in the frankest kindness. If Pandone was to be stiffened into playing go-between with the Pope, his shaken self-confidence and comfortable, warm complacency must first be restored.

"The sorrow of it, my friend." The Emperor's voice was very gentle as he grasped Pandone's hands in his firm clasp. "Only we, who are fathers, know the pangs of a father's loss. It might have been my Henry—the lads were

not far from an age." Slipping an arm across the rounded shoulders he led the Cardinal slowly the length of the room, bending towards him as they walked.

"Comfort? Ah! comfort is the gift of God, and He sends it to us in the heart of a friend. How did the poor lad die?"

A convulsion shivered through Pandone. "Rome! Rome! Rome!" he cried weakly. But though the whimpering wail was an anathema and an accusation rather than a reply Frederick did not repeat the question. It had served its purpose; the Cardinal was shaken from the dull level of his lethargy. Once let passion be roused in him and he would shape it to his own ends.

"Forget Rome, forget your wrongs in the loving sympathy of your friends. And what tender sympathy it must be. There is the Holy Father, who owes, as all the world knows, his elevation to your disinterestedness——"

"And forgets!" said Pandone, "ah, *Dio mio*, how easy it must be to forget a benefit."

"Then you and I, my friend, must rouse his memory."

But Pandone's passion had died down: he was, as yet, too nerve-exhausted for sustained effort.

"'Sandro is dead," he said, weakening to tears, "dead—dead—dead."

Instantly Frederick grew sterner. A stronger stimulus than sentiment was needed to restore the mental and moral fibre. "Yes, 'Sandro is dead: but who is to avenge him? The Holy Father? The Holy Father forgets! Who, then? Shall I tell you? You, Your Eminence, you, you yourself. Then, in the Conclave—all the world knows it—you stood aside that age might be honoured—age that so soon forgets! But who was to follow age when age failed? Who but Giordano Pandone, who stood aside."

"No, Your Highness, no: there was no promise, no bargain." Already the Cardinal's voice had grown firmer.

"Promise? Bargain? No, neither: promises and bargains at such times are own brothers to simony and are forbidden by the Church. But was there a man of them all who did not say in his heart, Ugolino Conti is old—Giordano Pandone will be the next Pope? Colonna, perhaps; Pelagius, perhaps; and yet they, too, said it in their hearts; but while the others said it of goodwill Colonna and Pelagius said it with a grudge. Why? Because Colonna and Pelagius are of the nobles, as Gregory is of the nobles—Gregory, who forgets."

"No promise," repeated the Cardinal, but in a changed tone. It was as if he admitted the spirit while denying the form. His eyes had brightened, he stood more erect and the tremulous mouth had ceased to tremble.

"A forecast, then," said Frederick. "But Gregory is of the nobles: to mistrust the people, to hold them under foot, is engrained in him. And you, Your Eminence? All honour to the greatness of spirit that can rise superior to its clogging limitations; you are of the people: Gregory would rather see a Colonna of the nobles in St. Peter's Chair than a Pandone of the people, and so this crushing private sorrow is turned to your public discredit. Gregory forgets! But Gregory's debt remains and we must teach him to remember."

"We, Your Grace?" The stimulus worked. Pandone grew more the Prince of the Church with every sentence, but was too shrewd to insinuate the dignity to the Emperor as Ugolino Conti might have done. "Your Grace's kindness shall never be forgotten—never!"

"But, Your Eminence, you have just told me Popes have short memories." Frederick's voice, playful for a moment as he voiced the prophetic flattery, grew grave again. "I have a bargain to propose, but one without simony in it."

As if unconsciously Pandone withdrew himself from the

arm that had lain across his shoulders and, a little apart, faced Frederick.

"A bargain, Your Highness?"

"No, I withdraw the word," said the Emperor coldly, and with something like contempt. He saw that the cunning and suspicion born in the man's peasant blood were aroused in a fear lest he be over-reached. "No bargain, but an honour to confer upon you because of my regard for your niece, Bianca."

"My niece, Bianca?" repeated the Cardinal as Frederick paused. What would come next? Had Bianca succeeded, he wondered, but never asked himself at what cost.

"She alone knows I am in Rome. Three days ago we two left Capua together——"

"Three days ago—Bianca? Ah! Your Grace, Your Grace——"

"Charity thinketh no evil," said Frederick sternly. "Nor is there evil. The man who thinks a light thought of Bianca Pandone breeds it out of his own foul mind. Through her I am in Rome to-day for the peace of Christendom; for her sake I offer you the gratitude of the Pope—of the whole Church: judge for yourself what that must mean when the next Conclave sits." He paused again, then added abruptly, as if by an after thought, "There is one condition."

The Cardinal also paused before replying. The sluggish blood was running full tide in his veins. 'Sandro was, for the moment, forgotten as the cunning, nimble brain measured advantages, measured consequences, and found both tremendous almost beyond words. The conditions? Some gain to the Empire at the cost of the Church—a thing easily promised and as easily evaded when the next Conclave was ended, and the time came for fulfilment. He repeated the word questioningly, doubtfully, yet with an attempt at dignity.

"Condition, Your Grace?"

"A pleasant one—that love shall have its way. Your niece is in her cousin's confidence——"

"Rivara?" Surprised and relieved though he was the Cardinal's mind leaped forward. Already, as Frederick had foreseen, he repented of his promise. "But Signor Rivara is only a simple gentleman."

"And a Pope-to-be may look higher? True, and yet I, the Emperor, beg you to give love its way. As to Signor Rivara, his future shall be my care."

"Your Highness, such kindness——"

"It is my debt to your house: is the condition accepted?"

There was a short silence while they faced each other as duellists might whose blades touched. Pandone was weighing the chances of temporising. With such prospects before him to marry Emilia to Rivara was sheer waste, and a promise to the Emperor could not be lightly broken, like a promise to a simple gentleman. Frederick, on his part, had a two-fold gain at issue—by the one stroke he deprived a possible Pope-to-be, and therefore an enemy to the Empire, of a powerful means of consolidating his influence in Italy, and attached his personal interest to the Empire through his son-in-law.

"Is the condition accepted?" he repeated, and at the curter, colder tone, Pandone hastily gave way lest in grasping at too much he should lose all.

"How can I refuse Your Highness," he said, his voice for the first time taking on its sonorous note. "Your Grace, I, too, have loved, and love never forgets its youth."

"Good! There is one decision you will not regret on the day the world slips from you, as slip from us all it must. Now, nor will this breed regret either, go to the Vatican, say to His Holiness——"

"Your Grace, he will refuse me, he will——"

"Then refuse to be refused. God of my life, man, have you not a prescriptive right of audience? Are you not the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte? Assert yourself, assert yourself. The meek shall inherit the earth? In Rome it is mostly the mud of the kennel that falls to their share. You are not in favour? Aye, I know: that is part of Colonna's plan. But they dare not shut you out lest they set up a precedent against themselves. Give them black look for black look: say curtly, It is the vital business of the Church, and if the Crusade fails the world will know where to set the blame. Be a man, Cardinal, be a man, not a whining priest."

"The Crusade, Your Highness?"

"Aye, the Crusade. Why else was Bianca in Sicily hunting cousins with the Pope's approval? Why Arsoli? Why grey frocks and black frocks by the score, but to smell out news of the Crusade? We are not altogether fools in Capua. With news of the Crusade in your mouth will Gregory dare refuse you audience? Not for five seconds!"

"What then, Your Grace?"

"Then—phrase it how you will to your own advantage—say to His Holiness, you two being alone together, that Frederick of Hohenstaufen—not the Emperor, not the King of Sicily and Jerusalem, but Frederick of Hohenstaufen, a faithful and loving servant of the Church, is here in Rome, here under your roof—press it to your advantage, Cardinal; you will know how—and crave speech with His Holiness."

"To what end, Your Grace?"

"Your Eminence, if another could have said what is in my mind as well, or better, than myself, I would have sent della Vigna or Luca Alvano in my place. His Holiness can refuse me; yes, but Christendom will portion the blame for what must follow. I am indifferent, for that blame will not fall upon me."

“But if he insists?”

For a moment Frederick was silent, his face set to a frown of deep thought; when he spoke it was with stern solemnity.

“Then I shall ride for Sicily to-day instead of to-morrow. Let come what may, before God my conscience is clear.”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE VICTORY OF THE CHURCH

“HE will see Your Grace, but with conditions.”

Almost three hours had passed since Pandone, in much physical fear and with many doubts, had quitted the palace secretly and strongly guarded. His fears were that Rome would recognise the father of 'Sandro. That the blood of the martyr may be the seed of the Church he did not deny, and went in terror lest the text should be put to the proof at his cost. But sitting well back in his litter, with the curtains drawn, he passed forth and back unmolested.

Nor were his doubts justified. The Vatican was at all times a hot-bed of intrigue, the Pope himself or his influence the prize of contending cliques. For the moment the party of Montelengo and Valsoldo, of which Pandone had been the head and hope, was out of favour, but though the Cardinal's coming had caused something of a sensation amongst the followers of Colonna, grouped at the lower door of the Papal Palace, there had been no opposition to his entrance; only Gregory himself could deny access to a member of the Sacred College. But there was no such friendly, obsequious welcome as on the day of Bianca's visit; barely a cold respect was paid his dignity, and his coming was hurriedly announced in advance.

If the reception at the outer door had been cold, the atmosphere of the Papal anteroom was freezing. Otho, warned in time, openly, almost ostentatiously, turned his back, and even the provincial bishop with whom he spoke dared not raise his eyes as Pandone entered, but gave all his

attention to the Camerlengo's sudden flow of friendly talk. As to the rest, whether cardinal, bishop, priest or layman, they either followed Otho's example, or bowed with a wooden, expressionless stolidity.

For a minute or two Pandone stood in his isolation, combing his beard with unconscious fingers. Some men insult spurs to aggression, some it cows, rousing the craven in them; the Cardinal was by nature of the latter, and events of the past four days had broken his nerve. But that he dared not return to face the Emperor's scorn he would have accepted defeat there and then. It was the easier course, and to the weak man the ease of the moment has often fatal attractions. Then he remembered some of Frederick's bitter phrases and grew afraid to be afraid, which is the next best thing to natural courage. The hand he laid on the Camerlengo's shoulder shook no more than might reasonably be expected in a nervous man. Otho turned with a jerk.

"Eh? Oh! It is you, Your Eminence."

"I, on the Church's urgent business."

"Ah!" Otho's voice, cold and antagonistic, grew sarcastic. "The Church already owes Your Eminence so much."

"And my friends are paying her debt." Pandone, sonorous and full-toned, was as cold and as bitter. "I trust, when all is clear, that her memory will be as good as mine. Cardinal Camerlengo, I must see His Holiness."

"Impossible! The French Envoy is in audience."

"I shall wait."

"Useless, quite useless. Cardinal Castiglione follows by appointment."

"Still I shall wait."

"Again useless. By direction of His Holiness, my Lord Bishop of Ascoli is to be presented on his elevation," and, a malicious smile in his faded eyes, Otho waved an airy hand towards his neighbour.

"The business of the Church comes first," said Pandone, his deep voice roughening.

By this time all conversation amongst the many groups filling the room had ceased, and all faces were turned upon the disputants. Through many of the silent watchers there shot a thrill of surprise, almost of apprehension at the insistence of the Cardinal of San Marco del Monte's last words. Here was a new Pandone, a stronger Pandone, a Pandone to be reckoned with; perhaps their openly hinted contempt had been premature.

Otho took up the challenge with alacrity.

"The business of the Church?" he repeated. "To reward the love and pious zeal of her sons is in part the business of the Church, and therefore the Bishop of Ascoli follows His Eminence."

"Camerlengo, you take too much upon you."

"Do you censure His Holiness, Cardinal Pandone? The appointment is his, not mine."

Then Pandone shot his bolt. "His Holiness would be the first to say that the Crusade takes precedence. Shut me out if you will, the Church—yes, all Christendom will know how to portion the blame if the Crusade is hindered. You are warned, and my conscience is clear. Fathers in God, signors, you are my witnesses," and Pandone embraced the circuit of the antechamber with a sweep of his hand at once dignified and appealing.

The silence which followed was so intense that through the communicating door, fast shut and muffled by a thick curtain though it was, could be heard the voice of the French Envoy in a dull rumble. Otho had fallen back a step, and from his lesser height was looking up, dumb for the moment and not a little aghast, into Pandone's passionate face. The Crusade? All knew how near the Crusade lay to Gregory's heart. To hinder the Crusade was to

forfeit all favour. It was the newly-made Bishop of Ascoli who broke the stillness.

"Your Eminence, I can wait," he said, humbly. A country priest, this was his first visit to Rome, and the greatness of it, the greatness of the forces contending within it, frightened him. "My business is not important——"

"It is not the importance of you or of your business," broke in Otho tartly; "it is the Holy Father's appointment that matters."

"You are wrong," said Pandone, greatly daring, but driven to assertion by memories of his interview with the Emperor. "What matters is the glory and advancement of the Church; what matters is the sailing of the Crusade. Camerlengo, for the last time—I must see His Holiness, and see him alone."

From one of the groups in the middle of the room Cardinal Perate detached himself, and taking the Cardinal Camerlengo by the arm led him aside. Perate had been a faithful adherent of Gregory's in the Conclave, voting steadily for his election from the very first trial of strength, but he was a man with a cautious, cool head, and Pandone's boldness had impressed him. When weakness oversteps its limitations it is a power to be reckoned with. For a moment they spoke earnestly together, then Perate turned to Pandone.

"I have suggested, Father, that His Holiness should be appealed to; the decision is his."

Pandone bowed. "I am content," he said, his voice modulated to a gentle sweetness; "my sole desire is to ease my conscience of its burden."

Thereafter there was but little freedom or conversation. For the most part men's minds gnawed the problem of Pandone's sudden self-assertion as a dog gnaws a bone too big for its jaws—it gains little by the gnawing yet cannot abandon the bone. One thing had resulted—the Cardi-

nal's isolation was at an end. Had he desired he might have been the centre of the largest group of them all.

But to their uneasy consternation he kept himself apart, choosing out the stranger in Rome, the newly-made bishop from beyond the mountains. Him he charmed, setting him at his simple ease, until he forgot his purple and was that most enviable of men—a priest who loved his people and was beloved by them.

It was not that 'Sandro was utterly forgotten, but before Pandone there hung the lure of the greatest power in the world, and in his desire to follow where it led he trampled himself underfoot. Once only he was interrupted. The envoy from France had been dismissed: did His Eminence desire to forestall Castiglione? But without hesitation Pandone waved the suggestion aside—Castiglione would have a vote in the next Conclave and might resent the super-session.

But Castiglione having hastened his audience there was no further delay beyond the necessary explanation, and the obtaining Gregory's formal consent to the change in ceremony. Nor did the Pope hesitate. Frederick's shrewdness was justified and the way was clear. Involuntarily Pandone braced himself to face the offended Pope and the door was shut, but what passed between them at their protracted interview was never known.

"Conditions?" repeated Frederick indignantly, when Pandone reported the result of his mission. "But that the peace of Christendom is at stake, I would reject them in advance and refuse to listen. The Emperor has a right of audience without conditions: as it is, name them."

"There are three." The Cardinal's reluctance was plain. "First, that you disarm."

"Disarm?" The veins in the Emperor's temples swelled to purple cords as the blood rushed to his face. "Am I an assassin like his monk of Saint Francis? But

of that you know nothing, nor do I blame His Holiness. Well, in the name of peace, I agree." Drawing his sword with a rasp that set the blade quivering he laid it on a table and flung his dagger beside it. "There! What next?"

"That you do not draw nearer to him than three paces."

"And this man was my friend! Henceforth, the greater the distance between us the better! The length of Italy were not too great! and lastly?"

"That you leave Rome within twenty-four hours."

"There he hits off my own desire. That, from the first, was my own intention. Now, Cardinal, let us go."

"If Your Grace would condescend to share my litter?" Pandone ventured the suggestion diffidently, remembering how hotly the Emperor's anger had so recently flamed at what strained his dignity. But Frederick only laughed harshly.

"The honour is mine! A Pope-to-be conducting Frederick of Hohenstaufen to a Pope who shall not be for long! It is written in the stars, Cardinal, that my debt to the House of Pandone shall be a great one, and it shall be greatly repaid. Let us go."

At the entrance to the Vatican there was neither delay nor ceremony. The only visible preparation, or sign that they were expected, was that the usual group of curious onlookers had been dispersed from before the doors, securing secrecy, and that the Emperor and Pandone were instantly conducted to the ante-chamber. This, like the approaches to the palace, was void of strangers; Otho only was in attendance, waiting silently before the door of communication.

In silence he bowed to the Emperor, in silence slipped into the inner room to return almost instantly, in silence stood aside that Frederick, bareheaded for the first time, might enter. But when Pandone would have followed his guest the Camerlengo caught his arm.

"The Holy Father's orders," he whispered, and the closing door shut them out.

Gregory was seated upon a raised chair with his back to a window at the further end of the room. The curtains at either side of the casement were half drawn, so as to cast a shadow, but the light was ample. White robed, white faced, white coifed, his white hands folded in his white lap, the Pope resembled a marble statue of stern ascetic age, rather than a living man whose blood still ran riotously hot. He sat very erect, his thin shoulders squared, his chin raised, his eyes clear and shining under drawn brows. Midway, cutting the room in two, a silken cord stretched from wall to wall—it was the Pope's "thus far and no farther."

Gregory was not alone. Behind him, one at each shoulder, but standing wide of his person, were Capoccio and Giovanni Colonna, Princes of the Church, Cardinals and priests, yet as keen and seasoned soldiers as Frederick himself. Now their trappings of war were discarded for the most sumptuous robes their high rank in the Church provided, but it was the sight of the candles each carried flaming in broad daylight that sent despair thrilling to the Emperor's heart, as conviction broke upon him that his plea was doomed to refusal before ever he uttered it. They were significant, these candles, their very presence a threat: Gregory, Frederick told himself, had fathomed his purpose in coming to Rome and would grant no relief. The Crusade must sail or the Pope, Vicar of Christ and Vicegerent of God upon earth, would launch his anathemas, proclaiming excommunication, hurling interdict, and with all the illimitable power of the Keys condemn him and his Empire to utter and outer darkness, even as these candles were quenched.

All that, or the sense of it, Frederick understood even while his first comprehensive glance swept the room, but his

face gave no sign as he advanced midway to the barrier cord and paused. Further he would not go: his cause was already lost and every foot he drew nearer to the implacable old man was a confession of weakness, a confession of the Empire's necessity, and therefore an added laurel to the Pope's arrogant pride.

Gregory broke the silence. His thin, ironical voice was Arctic-cold, bitter as wormwood, hard as steel.

"What zeal, my son! France sends an envoy, but you come in person to congratulate us on our elevation."

"Rather to congratulate the Church that her Head upon earth is so pious, so learned, so wise through experience and such a lover of Italy."

"Italy? Why Italy? To a good father all his sons are alike dear: the Church's love, like her holy mission, is conterminous with the ends of the earth."

"But Italy was very near the heart of Ugolino Conti."

"And all nations are the sons of Gregory's affection. Is Your Highness in Rome to bring us news of the Crusade?"

Frederick left the question unanswered. "My heart is not so large as Your Holiness's: with me Sicily and the Empire come first. Holy Father, I am in Rome to plead for Sicily."

"Plead then." Gregory's voice was thinner, harder, colder, more ironical and sarcastic if that were possible. He bided his time. Rome had flouted him, threatening his prestige, and the prestige of the Church; but upon Sicily and the Empire he would demonstrate to Rome, and through Rome to all the world, that the Church had abated no jot of her claims, nor shed one tittle of her power to enforce them.

"Holy Father, for ten years I have laboured in Sicily, suppressing evil, co-ordinating laws, ensuring peace, founding schools of learning, developing resources, spreading commerce—a slow work, for nations are not built in a day. Now Sicily is like a tilled field, newly won from the grip of the wilderness; the weeds and rank growths are cut down

or rooted out, the soil trenched, the earth ridged for sowing and in part sown. But the hedges are weak, the land still raw and foul: if left to itself the tares and charlock of the past will sprout anew and poison——”

“Must Christ’s sepulchre be trodden under foot by the heathen that Sicily may grow fat?”

“Your Holiness, in a year—two at the most——”

“Three times you swore an oath and three times cried the same cry—delay! delay! delay! till Honorius, overgentle with your paltering, absolved you for the moment. But not I, Frederick of Hohenstaufen, Emperor for the day, not I. Your oath holds, or you stand forsworn and perjured before God and man. The Crusade must sail.”

“Your Holiness, for my people’s sake! It is for them I plead, not for myself. In a year—two at the most, with my work consolidated, secured against crumbling in my absence, I can push the Crusade with a good heart——”

“God grant me patience! Are you so bound to your Saracens, so blood-brother to Mahound, so handfasted to your Moslem women, your dancers and worse, so sunk in the slough of your evil delights, that you have no heart for the first and greatest work of a Christian man, even though he had sworn no oath at all before the face of the Almighty, and at His very altars? That oath holds, holds to the letter, or the outraged heart of the Church will cry aloud to heaven for judgment. What?” The Pope paused. Shifting yet more upright in his chair he shook a bloodless hand above his head. His white face had paled yet whiter to the bleached suggestion of a drained corpse; but there was no failure of age in his voice, it grew fuller, rounder, stronger, as passion soared from smouldering heat to flame. “I thought I nurtured a child in the bosom of the Church, but it is a basilisk—a serpent to sting her heart. From your first cry of life the Church has yearned over you as a mother over her first-born, the child of her early love; she

has dandled you on her knees, borne you on her shoulder, fed you at her breast. Now, grown to a man's stature, you make mock of her sacred mysteries and profane her holy altar with false oaths. But, beware, Frederick of Hohenstaufen, beware how you press the indulgence of our love over far. Am I a dumb dog who dare not bark? By the might of God given me at the hand of His Spirit, beware lest I not only bark but bite! Thrice you have sworn and thrice shamelessly evaded fulfilment of your vows. But the patience of your nursing-mother is at an end. If to the three false oaths you add a fourth, then, by the great name of Him by whose will I am what I am——”

“Nursing-mother!” broke in the Emperor, unable longer to restrain his growing wrath. “No mother, but a step-mother, cold, callous, calculating, greedy of her own gain and careful of her own profit. Is Christian charity dried up at the fount that you have no pity for Sicily? Pity? No! for in the name of charity you, or the Church whose head you are, sucked Sicily as a ripe orange. Under plea of a lad's vow you kill the growth which through peace might become too strong for your fears. In humble words of mock humility you call yourself the Servant of servants, and in the same breath claim lordship over Kings and Emperors to the very ends of the earth—you, who cannot keep in check your handful of near-by Romans for one short month!”

At the final reproach, a barb pointed in bitterness and winged by truth, the furious Pope could contain his passion no longer. Shaking as if with a palsy he pushed himself upright from his chair, his white, meagre figure towering from its elevation over the angry Emperor.

“Infidel—perverter of truth—heretic——”

“Heretic? Must God be for ever silent because *you* have spoken?”

“No more! no more! I'll hear no more! It is poison

in our ears—poison—poison.” Groping blindly back upon each side Gregory reached for the candles, caught them in a passionate, convulsive clutch, and thrust them out before him with hands that so wavered and trembled that the guttering lights burned blue as they wheeled in the air. “Frederick of Hohenstaufen, Rome crowned and Rome can uncrown. Beware lest the *Mene, Tekel, Upharsin* sounds in your ears. I give you your choice: The Crusade on the day appointed, or, by the living God, Anathema—Interdict—Excommunication on you and all your people.”

Again the silence was tense. In the heat of his excitement the Emperor, forgetting his resolution, had advanced as far as the dividing cord and now stood gripping it with both hands, looking fiercely up into the white face of the Pope as he reared the candles above his head, ready to dash them to darkness on the marble floor and hurl his curse with them. In his bitter wrath Frederick would gladly have given half the years of his life to fling back a defiance and bid Rome do her worst. But he knew he had been worsted in the struggle: how can the powers of this world fight against those of the world to come?

“The Crusade will sail,” he said, turning his back.

Capocci and Colonna caught at the swaying candles as the Pope sank into his chair with a shivering sigh: the victory was won, the Church triumphant, the Empire humbled, but the battle had sapped his strength and the burden of his more than eighty years was heavy upon him.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE END OF DOUBT

BACK in the Pandone palace Frederick shut himself up in the private apartment allotted to him, denying himself to all men and refusing meat or drink though the hour of dinner had long passed. Of that time of mental stress, when he trampled his humiliation under foot and built anew his shattered plans for Sicily, he never spoke. It may be that the sailing of the Crusade on the appointed day, only to return before ever the coast of Palestine was sighted, thus conforming in the letter but holding to his own purposes in the spirit, was a decision of that dark hour. That the Crusade did so sail and so return are undisputed truths of history, the wherefore of its return is in doubt.

But that is not of this story. In the end Rivara was summoned.

"I leave Rome at day-break," said Frederick briefly.

"I beg you will see that my horse is ready."

"What escort shall I order, Your Grace?"

"None."

"But, Your Grace," protested Rivara, "it is not fitting——"

"Fitting? Frederick of Hohenstaufen needs no escort and for the Emperor you have none adequate: I ride alone." He paused a moment, then added, "If the Signorina Pandone will set me on my way I shall be yet deeper in her debt. I make no doubt she will. Follow us at a distance, Signor Rivara, just yourself alone, and see her safely back to the city."

"But she earnestly desires to see Your Grace. She has begged me——"

"Not to-day." Frederick was peremptory. "Many things cry out for decision and I must be alone. The Pope has flung all our lives into the melting-pot. Tell her the Crusade will sail; she will understand." He paused again, thinking deeply; when he looked up his grey eyes had a hint of humour in them. "My friend, it is borne in upon me that you will never call a Pope father! After to-day they will think Pandone too much the friend of the Empire."

"So long as I call the Cardinal father," began Rivara; but Frederick silenced him with a gesture.

"Have no doubt of that. It is not just that I hold his word, and have promised to secure your future: Pope Giordano might forget Cardinal Pandone as Gregory has forgotten Ugolino Conti; but as things are, an honourable gentleman, secure in the service of the Emperor, is no bad match."

"Your Highness," cried Rivara, "how can I thank you; what have I done——"

"You? Nothing! Thank Bianca—thank your wife to be that she won her cousin's love. And yet I am wrong; to have compelled a good and almost great woman's faith, so that she trusts you as herself is so much that in winning your service the Emperor will have the best of the bargain. Now take my message to Bianca and send me some food: if His Eminence desires to see me crave his indulgence until to-morrow morning."

With the dawn still grey Frederick made ready to depart, but not from the main gate of the palace lest, riding unguarded, he should provoke attack by the malcontents of Rome. Bianca rode with him, Rivara would follow; beyond these only the Cardinal and Emilia were present, with Jacopo holding the horses. Bianca was pale with the pallor of a sleepless night, but the Emperor's strong, ruddy

face showed no signs of the past day's storms: he knew the worst and, with characteristic resolution, his unconquered spirit rose, eager to grapple and defeat the added odds. Frederick was of that giant breed whom contact with Mother Earth made stronger.

"Let happen what may, Cardinal, while I live the Empire will never forget the debt to your house. Young mistress, I give you this advice—marry quickly and come south: history is in the making and great deeds lie at the door of to-morrow. Sorrow? Aye, I know and grieve for your sorrow with all my heart; but love is God's cure for sorrow and every other ill upon earth. Rivara, mount Bianca. Farewell, Your Eminence, my last word to you is, Beard Gregory, publish everywhere that through you has come deliverance from doubt. The Church may be grateful—perhaps. Now, Bianca, let us go."

Mounting, the Emperor rode forward by the girl's side, but turned at a bend in the narrow lane to uncover and wave his final farewell; Rivara was preparing to mount. Until a main street was reached neither spoke, then Bianca said abruptly, but with such a catch in the throat that the three words were almost strangled to a sob,

"Failure, Your Grace?"

"Failure?" he repeated cheerily. "No! no failure: failure is final and this is but a check. We still march breast forward, Sicily and I." For a time he rode in silence, letting his horse pick his own way and choose his own pace. His thoughts were in that melting-pot where all their lives were fusing that they might be moulded afresh: when he spoke it was in the slow tone of conviction. "There will never be a Pandone Pope; God grant the grey old wolf a long tether; whoever succeeds him will be a good hater of the Empire, that much is clear."

The girl made no reply. A profound and bitter resentment stirred her to her depths, heart and soul. That there

never would be a Pandone Pope touched her not at all, but if Gregory's far off successor must needs be an enemy to the Empire then Luca Alvano was selling himself for nought, and that is always a devil's bargain, let it be in whose name it may. She could have borne to see him mount from greatness to greatness in a splendid cause: in some calmer day she could, perhaps, have gloried in his exaltation to that greatest greatness, the Headship of the Church, content to know that Italy would bless his name as the Peace-bringer while time lasted. But to dream such splendid dreams and wake to a barren selling of the life, heart and soul, for nought, filled her with rebellion. Hot in her passionate resentment she looked aside at Frederick, but he rode dumbly on, his face inscrutable.

There were few abroad in the streets. Not only was it the hour when the prowlers, born of the very greatness of a great city, creatures of rapine who haunt its lanes and alleys, seek their lairs, driven grudgingly to cover by the honest light of day, but Rome, restless, insolently greedy Rome was calmer. With the Church's prestige secured in the south and before all the world by his victory over the Empire, Gregory had thought it politic to purchase peace at his gates by a fresh donative. The Pope's grace had been announced the night before, and with this new bone to mumble Rome had ceased to growl: had Alessandro Pandone still lived he might have swaggered unmolested as of old. At the San Giovanni gate there was no challenge: when there was no hue and cry abroad whoso desired might leave Rome and welcome.

Once beyond the walls and clear of the city Frederick, who sat his horse more like a dumb image than a living man, broke the silence.

"Bianca, I ride to Capua, but what will you do?"

"I?" Bianca started. Poor soul, her thoughts had been in Sicily, living bitter-sweet memories over again. If she

had put these thoughts in words it would have been "Oh, death in life, the days that are no more." "I don't understand, Your Grace."

"You will bide in Rome with your uncle and cousin?"

"No, Your Grace; I shall return to Malazzorbo; Cosimo has promised to see me safe."

"My advice is, stay in Rome."

"No," she repeated, with her old decision. "I must go to my own people whose love was always warm about me though I knew it so little that I never gave God thanks."

"Love is in Rome."

"Emilia has Cosimo, she does not need me. I shall go back to Malazzorbo."

"Then Luca Alvano will have the longer ride, that is all."

"Luca?" she repeated, the pallor of the night's vigil banished on the instant, "why should Luca ride—anywhere?"

"For the best cause in the world." Frederick's eyes softened though the slow gravity of his voice never changed. Hard, iron-willed, cruel even, as became his times, there was always a strong thread of sentiment through his tough fibre, else how could he have been the poet and Art-lover he was? "We dreamed a dream, he and I, but Gregory has awakened me to realities. There never can be an Alvano Pope any more than a Pandone, and so I think Luca will ride to Malazzorbo. Now will you bide in Rome?"

"No," she answered steadily, "I go back to Malazzorbo. The love we know is better than the love we may never know."

Though the flush was still on her cheek, the light that had leaped to the eyes when the significance of Frederick's meaning grew clear had died away. Her own farewell words, Henceforth you go your way and I go mine, and the interpretation Luca Alvano would put upon them and her absence in the Emperor's company stood between her and

hope. More than the love of Tita and Giuseppi Sirani, strong magnet though it was, drew her to Malazzorbo. There she could ease the pain of her soul by the labour of her hands; not by many millions would she be the first to cry, Blessed be toil! In Rome she could but let the twin mill-stones of heart and spirit grind each other to torment, with Emilia's happy love before her eyes to make plain her loss—every way Malazzorbo would be better.

Frederick urged her no further. There were times, he knew, when a woman's no was final. Commonly it is when her pride is touched, as Bianca Pandone's was then. Neither did he break into other and more trivial talk. It was to say this one thing he had brought her out from Rome: having said it and failed he rode in silence, his thoughts elsewhere. It is one of sincere friendship's lighter privileges that silence is not an offence. It was his purpose to ride as far as where the roads joined and there bid her farewell.

So dumbly riding, his thoughts in Sicily, the watchfulness which never sleeps in the trained soldier became aware of a landmark of yesterday—a grey old church crowned by a slender square tower whose Roman cross bore a giant lance shaft. Half unconsciously he slackened pace, his eyes, keenly vigilant, roaming from the shrine on the right to the *Dominus meus et Deus meus* over the main door, and thence to a great chestnut in full leaf upon the left, and he started in the saddle, drawing rein suddenly. Under the shade of the tree a horse was tethered: after a second scrutiny Frederick turned to Bianca, who also had halted.

"Gregory called me a heretic and was wrong. I am a man who dares to think, a man who believes God is not dumb, nor will be while the world lasts, that is all. Our roads are uncertain before us, let us go together and pray God for our heart's desire—if so be it please Him to grant it."

"Our heart's desire?" she repeated, looking across at

him, and as she spoke her eyes filled. Her heart and its desire were so far apart.

"Why not? It is God's world still and a check is not failure. While there is life no disappointment is final."

"Oh!" she cried, "and they call you heretic!" and followed him to the shade of the chestnut where bridle-rings were hung that wayfarers, whose roads were uncertain, might pause and do this very thing.

In silence Frederick haltered the beasts, in silence dismounted her, and in silence they climbed the steps to the church door, closed only by its heavy leathern curtain: Rivara, in the distance, rode slowly to the shade of the tree and waited.

The church was very still, very dim; as yet the sun was to the east and the coloured rays from the rose window set in the apse were quenched by the broad bulk of the high altar: through the clerestory but little light flickered as yet. To right and left, dividing the nave from the flanking aisles, heavy square pillars, built up of blocks of travertine, supported the groined roof. Before the altar a single hanging lamp burned like a fixed star, paling before the daylight as stars pale, and beneath it, at the very rails, his head resting upon his folded arms, knelt the church's sole worshipper.

Dropping the curtain behind them the Emperor motioned Bianca to go forward, and side by side they advanced down the empty nave to the altar-steps: there they knelt, and Bianca, sinking back, bowed her head between her hands.

The heart's desire! A phrase easily said, but how hard to find a form of words to clothe it with full expression. For the desire of any human heart, however single, shifts with the changing thought as the rainbow lights of a diamond shift from red to violet as it is turned in the hand, always the same diamond but never the same glory. For the moment her heart's desire was for peace, for nothing so

much as to be at rest from the gnawing fret of her sorrow; but in the divided fragment of a second peace had blazed from the calm light of negation to the glowing passion of her love for Luca Alvano, for there, in the fulness of that love's gladness lay her life's true peace.

"Thou knowest, God!" she said under her breath, but with a sob. Three words only, yet enough; for what God knows is surely prayer to the fullest. "Thou knowest—Thou knowest!" and raised her eyes to look in spirit beyond the grey groining of the ancient roof to the blue heavens it blotted out, and saw Luca Alvano himself standing by the altar-rails.

From where he knelt at her side Frederick rose, holding out a hand to assist her to her feet.

"Come," he said briefly: "you, too, Alvano," and led the way to a door on the right of the choir. With a mind that leaped forward at this very moment he had noted it on their slow advance down the nave.

It was, as he had supposed, the sacristy. Within, a priest was robing for prime: to him Frederick turned.

"Father, of your courtesy give place a while. Oh, have no fear; a robber of churches would not have kept vigil all night long as one of us has done. Besides, that door to the outside is locked, take the key and keep guard yourself in the church." But with the clicking of the latch as the priest, after a brief pause of hesitation, obeyed, his manner changed and the smooth graciousness dried out of the voice. "Alvano, how comes it that you, whom I left in Capua, are found in Rome?"

A biting retort rose to Alvano's lips, an acid contempt that would sear both listeners in the one instant. But it died unuttered, killed in part by an astonished bewilderment and in part by respect and ancient custom.

"The business of Sicily brought me, Your Grace."

"And for Sicily you keep vigil as a priest-to-be keeps it?"

"It was so arranged, Your Grace."

"So arranged the night you told me that for you there was no one woman in the world: you remember? I see you do. Answer me now, you who have kept vigil all night long before God's altar, has there been no such woman since then? and was there no such woman in your thoughts even as you knelt there?"

Again the scathing retort that should rebuke and wither hypocrisy rose to Alvano's lips, yet unconsciously his eyes shifted to Bianca and the words died unsaid. Her face, weary with the weariness born of heart-ache, was pale and sorrowful, but her eyes met his tranquilly and unafraid. If there was an appeal in them it was not for mercy but comprehension. Because of that appeal he answered obliquely.

"Your Grace is familiar with the old books. Once there was a king's servant who nursed a lamb in his bosom; but the king, his master——"

"In God's name, hold your peace lest you shame yourself past your own forgiveness! Could you believe that of your friend? That same God knows I am not perfect—there never was but one perfect man and him the world crucified—but I am not so vile as that."

Alvano's face grew stern. "I was in the garden the morning of the day you left Capua—and you did not leave alone."

"And did you hear me say, 'Have no fear, Bianca, my sister?' or her answer, 'If I had fear would I be in Capua at all? My soul is my own!' Go down on your knees and thank God there are women too good for men to understand, yet not too good to love us through our failures, Him be praised! Yes; for Sicily's sake we left Capua together, rode to Rome together that through Pandone I might see your old grey wolf, Gregory, and plead for my people. And I have seen him. Frangipani was right: there can never be an Imperialistic Pope—that dream is over, and being

over Sicily needs the soldier, not the priest. Now answer me again; was there—is there, one supreme woman in the world?”

Without reply Alvano looked from one to the other. Full comprehension came slowly, but with its coming his sternness broke down, and with the cry, “Bianca,” he stretched out both hands. Instantly she caught them in hers and for a moment they were as if the world was not. Then said Frederick,

“Glory and Greatness! But greater than greatness is Love.”

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